The New Criterion

February 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: February 1993

Politics & sex at the MLA

The Modern Language Association of America, which boasts a membership of 32,000 college and university teachers and administrators, was founded in 1883. Yet at its most recent annual convention, which took place in New York in December, the date most conspicuously celebrated was 1968. That was the year in which a small group of left-wing academics—mostly professors of English—organized themselves into the Radical Caucus at the MLA. Their purpose was to radicalize the MLA in order to transform the organization into an instrument of the political Left.

Twenty-five years later, the founders of the Radical Caucus had ample reason to celebrate. Presentation after presentation at this year's convention made it clear that the left-wing takeover of the MLA is now complete. What had once been an association of literary scholars today has become, in all but name, an openly aggressive political-action organization that has turned the classrooms of the nation into an arena for propagating left-wing causes and radical life-styles. The study of literature may still be the nominal reason for the existence of the MLA, but its real mission—at its own meetings, and in the classrooms where its members teach young students—is political activism.

Nowhere was the triumph of this radicalization more evident than in the MLA's presidential address, which at the December convention was delivered by Houston A. Baker, Jr., the Albert M. Greenfield Professor of Human Relations at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Baker, the first black president of the MLA, simply took it for granted that he was expected to speak about politics rather than literature on this ceremonial occasion, and speak about politics he did—and with a degree of partisan demagoguery once considered more appropriate to a political rally than to a congress of literary scholars. He even coined a new slogan for the kind of political activism he envisions as an appropriate academic course for the remainder of the 1990s. "Local pedagogy" was the name he bestowed upon the particular brand of political action he has in mind for both faculty and students.

Exactly what the president of the MLA meant by "local pedagogy" was made perfectly clear to his large and enthusiastic audience, and it had nothing to do with pedagogy as that word is generally understood. For Professor Baker the most immediate task of such "local pedagogy" at his own university in Philadelphia will be the destruction of white fraternities. These voluntary organizations of undergraduate students were said to pose so great a threat to the rights of women students—especially black women—and to

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homosexual students that the right of the fraternities to exist at all must be categorically denied. This proposal to deny white male students the right to the kind of voluntary association that Professor Baker and other radicals are demanding for black students, homosexual students, and other "minorities" was greeted with rapturous applause by his audience of more than one thousand academics. Like many other sessions at the December convention, Professor Baker's address exuded the feverish atmosphere of incipient totalitarianism.

Professor Baker and several others made it clear that their celebration of 1968 was given additional impetus by the prospect that the election of a new administration in Washington signaled a revitalization of the kind of radical activism that has long been associated with "the Sixties." Professor Baker was perfectly explicit about his belief that "the wicked"—meaning the Reagan and Bush administrations—had now been supplanted by "the rebirth this past November," as he said, "of the possibility for hope in the humanities." Now it is our impression that the "wicked" decade of the Eighties didn't do so badly for radicals like Professor Baker, who managed during that time to turn the political subversion of the humanities into a growth industry—and at very high salaries, too. Still, for the top brass at the MLA, it isn't enough to have effectively destroyed the standards of literary scholarship and turned the study of the humanities into a branch of radical politics: they are determined to stamp out the last remaining pockets of resistance to their imposition of ideological conformity as well. This is the real meaning of Professor Baker's call for "local pedagogy" and his belief that the new administration in Washington will lend the weight of the federal government to an even greater degree of enforcement in matters of "political correctness" and "multiculturalism" than is already the case. We were thus given a sign in Professor Baker's presidential address that the born-again radicalism of the 1990s is likely to make the radicalism of the 1960s look like a picnic.

The MLA has long embraced the graphic celebration of sexual excess and "alternative" sexual life-styles that were such prominent components of Sixties-style radicalism. Even the titles of many papers delivered at recent MLA conventions are unprintable in the mainstream media. But this year's convention took the obession with bizarre sexual subjects to new depths. There were a good many sessions at the December meeting in which conventional heterosexual behavior was looked upon with a loathing and contempt that used to be reserved for the most unspeakable criminal acts, while at the same time some of the more extreme varieties of "alternative" sexual behavior—including, in at least one instance, sex with infants—were extolled as if they represented some ideal human achievement. And this defense of the indefensible sometimes entailed a use of language on the part of the speakers—professors who teach kids in college—that is usually confined to X-rated films. Much of the time at this congregation of teachers and scholars, a sense of decency as well as scholarship was in short supply.

Above all, the 1992 convention of the MLA reminded us that the "long march through the institutions" that left-wing radicals called for in the Sixties has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of those fomenting revolt and cultural insurgency twenty-five years ago. In 1968, the Radical Caucus was widely regarded as a fringe group whose activities had nothing to do with the study or teaching of literature. Today, the voice of the Radical Caucus speaks to the assembled dignitaries of the Modern Language Association from the platform of that organization's presidency. The "local pedagogy" of which Professor Baker speaks is no longer confined to the political rally, where it belongs. It now occupies the offices and classrooms of our most prestigious educational institutions.

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The Hoving follies

In the days when Thomas Hoving was director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from 1967 to 1977, his supporters often charged that his critics were much too hard on him. Were his de-accessioning policies, which entailed the loss of some marvelous pictures, a disaster? Well, perhaps. But just think, his defenders would say, about all the great things he has acquired for the museum. Was his show-biz, glitzy style detrimental to the fundamental purposes of a great art museum? Well, maybe, it would be admitted. But just look at the box-office numbers, they would respond. Wasn't it great that so many people were now coming to the Met? (Never mind what they did when they got there.) Did a good many of Mr. Hoving's misleading public statements create a credibility problem of monumental proportions for the museum? Well, yes, it would be acknowledged, but that was said to be merely an error in public relations and not really reflective of the serious work that was being accomplished. Were his spendthrift programs—not only in regard to acquisitions and exhibitions but, above all, in the runaway expansion of the museum itself—likely to saddle the Met with vexing financial burdens for many years to come? Well, that too might be admitted. But as long as the crowds increased and the inventory of acquisitions expanded and the general atmosphere of razzle-dazzle created an impression of popular success, Mr. Hoving's reckless policies continued to be defended in high places—right up to the moment when, with an almost audible sigh of relief, his resignation was gratefully accepted.

Now, with the publication of *Making the Mummies Dance*,[1] Mr. Hoving's highly imaginative (shall we say?) account of his tenure at the Met, his erstwhile supporters have been given their Hoving-style reward—a kick in the teeth. Quite apart from its many inventions and inaccuracies, which have already been the subject of much discussion and refutation in the press, *Making the Mummies Dance* is most remarkable for the way its author has set out to avenge himself on the very people who were responsible for placing him in a position of power and influence, and for keeping him there in the face of the often devastating criticism that portrayed Mr. Hoving in terms that his own memoirs now amply confirm. The basic charge against Mr. Hoving as director of the Met was that he was neither intellectually serious nor morally responsible in either his policies or in his manner of implementing them. After a reading of *Making the Mummies Dance*, his critics may well have reason to feel that, far from having been too hard on Mr. Hoving, they had never been sufficiently severe. For this is a book so utterly devoid of intellectual substance and so reprehensible in its professional ethics that it is at times hard to believe that one of our greatest cultural institutions had actually been placed in its author's charge for an entire decade in the twentieth century. Nothing that Mr. Hoving's critics ever wrote about him frames an indictment of either his talents or his character more damaging than the one to be found in his own book. This is a document that sets a new low in the literature of contemporary cultural life. The museum profession will be a long time recovering from it, and in this respect, at least, if not in many others, it accurately represents Mr. Hoving's career in that profession.

In a recent interview with Mr. Hoving in *The New York Times*, it was revealed that in one of his current projects for television, a medium no doubt more suited to his talents and temperament, "he will serve as an on-air commentator on pop culture" for the Japanese newspaper *Chunichi Shimbun*. What a pity he didn't find his true métier many years earlier. What grief it would have saved us all!

1 *Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, by Thomas Hoving; Simon & Schuster, 447 pages, $25.

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Poetry & the silencing of art

by Hilton Kramer

Some claim the best stopped writing first.
For the others, no one noted when or why.
A few observers voiced their mild regret
about another picturesque, unprofitable craft
that progress had irrevocably doomed.
—Dana Gioia, in "The Silence of the Poets"

From time to time there appears a volume of criticism that, in the course of its attention to particular works of art, illuminates a good many more questions about our artistic and cultural affairs than are specifically addressed in its pages. Criticism tends to be at its best, of course, when it is most specific, when it derives its taste and standards from a particular artistic discipline and has something new and intelligent to say about the practice of the art from which it springs. Yet from Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* to T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* to Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age*, the most important criticism has always done something more than this. It has brought us up to date on the condition of art, on the place it now occupies in the world at large, and on the historical imperitives that may imperil its very existence. Criticism of this kind follows the course of art itself in making vital connections between art and life.

The volume of criticism that Dana Gioia has recently published under the title *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* is a book of this sort.[1] While it has much to tell us about particular poets and about the condition of poetry at the present time, it also raises profound questions about the fate of art, which is to say high art, in a society now in turmoil over the definition of its cultural goals. To these questions Mr. Gioia brings the gifts and experience of a first-rate literary artist, the intellectual rigor of a tough-minded critic, and an outlook on the world that is the reverse of everything we associate with the word "academic." He also brings a generosity of spirit that lives on easy terms with the obligation to make distinctions, including distinctions of quality. There was a time—a distant time, alas—when it might have been enough to say of Mr. Gioia that he approaches the critical task as an accomplished poet. But as he and his readers are keenly aware, in our society at the present time the figure of the poet as a cultural spokesman is much diminished, if in fact it can still be said to exist. This loss of public status and influence, together with its causes and consequences, is indeed one of the central concerns of this book, which in its very first paragraph describes the fate that has overtaken the career of poetry in our cultural life.

> American poetry now belongs to a subculture [writes Mr. Gioia]. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a

1 *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*, by Dana Gioia; Graywolf Press, 257 pages, $25; $12 paper.

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> relatively small and isolated group. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. As a class, poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible.

This is the theme that serves as the foundation of every essay in this book. It informs Mr. Gioia's analyses of individual poets, it underlies his discussion of language and form in poetry, and it sets the terms within which his more general observations on the condition of poetry and the lives of our poets are largely formulated.

About the poetry that derives from this peculiar cultural situation Mr. Gioia writes with uncommon critical penetration. No one is likely to write a better essay on the poetry of Robert Bly, for example, than Mr. Gioia's. Here is a characteristic passage on Bly's verse:

> Is it possible for a stanza of poetry to be both unadorned and overwritten? Here [in Bly's poem "A Meditation on Philosophy"] every phrase contains at least one heavy-handed hint to the author's mood. (Excerpting these clues, one could easily compose a telegram version of the poem: "Restless gloom grieving leaves down dusk low abandons cold.") But despite its crude overstatement, the language remains weirdly inert for a lyric poem. Characteristically, Bly simply asserts his emotions. His utilitarian language does little to re-create them in the reader. Instead, in the manner of the New Sentimentality, he tries to bully the reader into an instant epiphany of alienation and self-pity.

And here is an assessment of two of the many translations Bly has attempted, in this case of poems by Mallarmé and Rilke:

> As an impromptu translation in a French II oral exam, the Mallarmé might eke out a passing grade, but as poetry in English it fails the most rudimentary test. Not only does it not seem like the verse of an accomplished poet, it doesn't even sound like the language of a native speaker. Nor does the Rilke exhibit the virtues of a smooth literal translation. It transforms the tight, musical German into loose, pretentious doggerel. . . .
>
> By propagating this minimal kind of translation Bly has done immense damage to American poetry. Translating quickly and superficially, he not only misrepresented the work of many great poets, he also distorted some of the basic standards of poetic excellence. . . . In promoting his new poetics (based on his specially chosen foreign models), he set standards so low that he helped to create a school of mediocrities largely ignorant of the premodern poetry in English and familiar with foreign poetry only through oversimplified translations.

It should be pointed out, in this connection, that Mr. Gioia is himself a superb translator of poetry; see, for example, his version of Eugenio Montale's *Mottetti*.[2]

He is equally good on the very different problem of John Ashbery's poetry.

> Ashbery is a discursive poet without a subject. Although he deals indirectly with several recurrent themes, themes that have become increasingly dark and personal as he has grown older, the poems are mainly the surface play of words and images. One never remembers ideas from an Ashbery poem, one recalls the tones and textures. If ideas are dealt with at all, they are present only as faint echoes heard remotely in some turn of phrase. Ideas in Ashbery are like the melodies in some jazz improvisation where the musicians have left out the original tune to avoid paying royalties. They are wild variations on a missing theme with only the original chord changes as a clue. This sort of music can be fun as long as someone doesn't try to analyze it like a Beethoven symphony.

Some of Mr. Gioia's subjects are surprising—Robinson Jeffers, for instance, whose poetry he praises with such conviction that

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2 *Mottetti: Poems of Love*, by Eugenio Montale. Translated from the Italian, and with an Introduction, by Dana Gioia. Graywolf Press, 73 pages, $14.95.

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he almost persuades me to have another look at it, something I wouldn't have thought possible. One of the most appealing qualities of Mr. Gioia's criticism is, indeed, that it is neither sectarian nor ideological in its tastes and interests. And his critical method, if it can be called that, is anything but narrow. It ranges from excellent close readings, where poems seem to require that kind of focus because of their complexity or unfamiliarity, to the kind of biographical or autobiographical approach that can sometimes afford a fresh perspective on poetry already well known to us. Thus, the critic who makes such a strong case for Jeffers also writes with great insight and feeling about Wallace Stevens—about Stevens's limitations, too—while at the same time giving us the best overall introductions to the poetry of Donald Justice, Weldon Kees, and Howard Moss that I have read.

Mr. Gioia knows how to praise and illuminate what he most admires—a rarer thing in the contemporary criticism of poetry than you might imagine—and he brings to every subject a voice that is entirely his own, the voice of a poet who knows what he likes and dislikes and why. His account, in "The Example of Elizabeth Bishop," of how he came to that wonderful poet's work as a student and what it meant to him is a beautiful example of the way criticism, when intensely personal, can sometimes illuminate an important poetic achievement while also describing very accurately an entire literary period.

> I noticed that most of my teachers—professors and graduate students alike—talked most comfortably about contemporary poetry when they could reduce it to ideology. The Beats espoused political, moral, and social revolution; hence they deserved attention. The feminists demanded a fundamental revision of traditional sexual identities; therefore their poetry became important. This utilitarian aesthetic transformed poetry into a secular version of devotional verse. The reading lists covering contemporary poetry rarely seemed to originate from genuine love or excitement about the work itself but rather from some dutiful sense of its value in illustrating some theoretically important trend. This dreary moral and aesthetic didacticism had little to do with the "lonely impulse of delight" that had brought me to poetry.
>
> Likewise I found it hard to consider Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti revolutionary when I first encountered them as classroom texts in an elite private university. To me they represented the conventional values—most of which, incidentally, I accepted—of the establishment I had just entered. Moreover, its novel trappings aside, their work often appeared predictable, prolix, and sentimental. By contrast, Bishop seemed original without being ostentatious, conversational without becoming verbose, and emotional without seeming maudlin. Her childhood reminiscence "First Death in Nova Scotia" worked all the more powerfully by being restrained. Her short narrative poem "House Guest" explored the subtle psychology of class relations more convincingly by being so insistently personal. She explored moral dilemmas without having a predetermined destination. Despite its familiar feel, her poetry almost always surprised one.

This single essay has more to tell us about the history of American poetry since the 1950s than most of the books that have been devoted to the subject.

The criticism in *Can Poetry Matter?* is also personal in other respects. It has a good deal to say, for example, about Mr. Gioia's own aesthetic outlook as a poet who has been much involved in the revival of formal and narrative verse. The subject of writing—and not writing—poetry in traditional metrical forms inevitably comes up in some of the essays on individual poets, but it is discussed more directly, along with the related issue of narrative poetry, in two essays, "Notes on the New Formalism" and "The Dilemma of the Long Poem." In the first of these essays, originally published in the 1980s, Mr. Gioia gives us the recent history of this declining interest in poetic form with his characteristic clarity:

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> Two generations now of younger writers have largely ignored rhyme and meter, and most of the older poets who worked originally in form (such as Louis Simpson and Adrienne Rich) have abandoned it entirely for more than a quarter of a century. Literary journalism has long declared it defunct, and most current anthologies present no work in traditional forms by Americans written after 1960. The British may have continued using rhyme and meter in their quaint, old-fashioned way and the Irish in their primitive, bardic manner, but for up-to-date Americans it became the province of the old, the eccentric, and the Anglophilic. It was a style that dared not speak its name, except in light verse. . . . By 1980 there had been such a decisive break with the literary past that in America for the first time in the history of modern English most published young poets could not write with minimal competence in traditional meters (not that this failing bothered anyone). Whether this was an unprecedented cultural catastrophe or a glorious revolution is immaterial to this discussion. What matters is that most of the craft of traditional English versification had been forgotten.

There then follows an unexpected and devastating account of what Mr. Gioia calls "the emergence of pseudo-formal verse" in the 1980s—a development that, in his view, is only another measure of our cultural loss. About these matters Mr. Gioia writes more in sorrow than in anger, and always with an admirable absence of dogmatism, and his principal interest is never argument for its own sake but the vitality of poetic art and its need for an audience beyond the academy. It is precisely because he sees in the revival of formal and narrative verse a means of achieving these goals that he writes about them with so much enthusiasm and intelligence.

> All these revivals of traditional technique . . . both reject the specialization and intellectualization of the arts in the academy over the past forty years and affirm the need for a broader popular audience. The modern movement, which began this century in bohemia, is now ending it in the university, an institution dedicated at least as much to the specialization of knowledge as to its propagation. Ultimately the mission of the university has little to do with the mission of the arts, and this long cohabitation has had an enervating effect on all the arts but especially on poetry and music. With the best of intentions the university has intellectualized the arts to a point where they have been cut off from the vulgar vitality of popular traditions and, as a result, their public has shrunk to groups of academic specialists and a captive audience of students, both of which refer to everything beyond the university as "the real world."

This "real world" beyond the university is, as it happens, one that the author of this passage knows well at first hand. Last year Mr. Gioia, who is now in his early forties, resigned a vice presidency at Kraft General Foods to become a full-time writer. He had worked as a business executive in New York for some fifteen years, during which time he also published his first two volumes of poetry—*Daily Horoscope* (1986) and *The Gods of Winter* (1991)—his translations of Montale and other poets, and the essays that have been collected in *Can Poetry Matter?* (He holds masters' degrees in both business administration and comparative literature.) This experience has naturally kindled his interest in other American poets who chose careers in business rather than in the academy to sustain their literary endeavors, and about this phenomenon he has written a brilliant and unusual essay called "Business and Poetry." This is one of the most interesting essays about the relation of art to life that any American poet has ever written.

It is astonishing, first of all, in the sheer number and quality of poets cited for discussion. We all know about Wallace Stevens in the insurance business and William Carlos Williams as a pediatrician, but Mr. Gioia's roll call goes well beyond the famous cases. Richard Eberhart, L. E. Sissman, Archibald MacLeish, A. R. Ammons, James Dickey, Robert Phillips, Richard Hugo, Ted Kooser (about whose poetry Mr. Gioia writes a separate essay in this book), William Bronk,

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and a number of lesser-known names are more than enough to persuade us that this is a development in American cultural life that has remained largely invisible to the literary public. For Mr. Gioia, what is most striking about this group of poets is what he describes as "their aversion to using this part of their lives"—that is, their working life in the business world—as the raw material of their poetry. Whatever their involvement in business, they turn out to be no more likely than the poets in the academy to reach beyond the "subculture" of poetry in what they write or in the way they write.

> The inability of these businessmen-poets to write about their professional worlds is symptomatic of a larger failure in American verse —namely its difficulty in discussing most public concerns. If business is nonexistent as a poetic subject, there is also a surprising paucity of serious verse on political and social themes. Not only has our poetry been unable to create a meaningful public idiom, but it even lacks most of the elements out of which such an idiom might be formed.

In the end, Mr. Gioia writes of the businessman-poet that "his job, like the academic's, has sheltered him from the economic consequences of writing without an audience. It even tutored him in surviving alienation." His poetry, too, belongs "to the private world that is the poet's mind." If, all the same, these businessmen-poets enjoyed a certain advantage, it was the advantage of remaining outsiders in the professional literary world.

> By refusing to simplify themselves into the conventional image of a poet, they affirmed their own spiritual individuality, and the daily friction of their jobs toughened the resolve. Ultimately the decisions they made forced them to choose between abandoning poetry and practicing it without illusions. Anyone who studies the lives and works of the men who combined careers in business and poetry finds this hard-won sense of maturity and realism at the center. Their lives may not always provide other poets with overtly inspiring examples, but their careers offer pragmatic and important lessons in spiritual survival. In a society that destroys or distracts most artists, they found a paradoxical means to prosper—both as men and writers. In American literature that is not a small accomplishment.

No one, I think, has written with greater clarity or greater poignancy—or with a greater sense of urgency, either—about the "subculture" in which the art of poetry is still confined and about its need to find what Mr. Gioia calls a "rapprochement with the educated public." Yet I have to say that as I turned the pages of this very good book, I often felt the same sense of melancholy and despair that I felt in reading the last lines of Mr. Gioia's poem "The Silence of the Poets," in *The Gods of Winter*.

> And what was lost? No one now can judge.
> But we still have music, art, and film,
> diversions enough for a busy people.
> And even poetry for those who want it.
> The old books, those the young have not
> defaced,
> are still kept somewhere,
> stacked in their dusty rows.
>
> And a few old men may visit from time
> to time
> to run their hands across the spines
> and reminisce,
> but no one ever comes to read
> or would know how.

This poem is, in a sense, about "the educated public" that Mr. Gioia has in mind for the poetry of the future, and he knows as well as the rest of us what has happened to it. He speaks in the title essay of his book about "the decline of literacy, the proliferation of other media, the crisis in humanities education, the collapse of critical standards, and the sheer weight of past failures," and even this melancholy inventory of our cultural woes does not tell the whole story. Poetry was once the exception in its lack of an "educated public," but that condition of loss and

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isolation is now becoming the norm for the entire realm of high culture. "The Silence of the Poets" now speaks for the silencing of art in many fields. This, too, is a subject of great concern in *Can Poetry Matter?* As Mr. Gioia writes in his title essay:

> If the audience for poetry has declined into a subculture of specialists, so too have the audiences for most contemporary art forms, from serious drama to jazz. . . . Contemporary classical music scarcely exists as a living art outside university departments and conservatories. Jazz, which once commanded a broad popular audience, has become the semi-private domain of aficionados and musicians. . . . Much serious drama is now confined to the margins of American theater, where it is seen only by actors, aspiring actors, playwrights, and a few diehard fans. Only the visual arts, perhaps because of their financial glamour and upperclass support, have largely escaped the decline in public attention.

I am not at all sure myself that the "financial glamour" that surrounds the visual arts hasn't done them more harm than good, for public attention of this sort has a price, too; but otherwise Mr. Gioia's account of the way the other arts are rapidly being consigned to the status of subcultures is perfectly correct. I do not therefore see what hope there is in expanding the audience for serious poetry at the very moment when the audience for classical music, for example, is diminishing at so rapid a rate that the whole profession is in crisis.

In Mr. Gioia's discussion of these problems, something very important has been left out—the subject of popular culture. For as the silencing of high art proceeds at a rapid rate in our society, what is taking its place on a scale never seen before is the noise of the most noxious and degraded varieties of pop culture. High culture cannot compete with its lethal effects on the minds and bodies of the young—and not only the young, of course—and neither can serious education, not as it is now conducted, anyway. And as long as the juggernaut of pop culture continues to swamp everything in its path, not only will poetry remain confined "to the private world that is the poet's mind" but so will all of high art—whatever remains of it—be confined to the private world of its subculture. *And what was lost? No one can judge* will be a line applicable to many things we now cherish. *Can Poetry Matter?* is an important book, but it does not yet have an answer to the question posed in its title.

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"They were as good as we were": the stories of William Trevor

by Richard Tillinghast

American readers of William Trevor's fiction may find themselves at something of a loss to decide precisely what nationality or ethnic identity to assign to this acknowledged master of the short story. The usual epithet for Trevor is Anglo-Irish, which, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Ireland, roughly places him, because he was born and raised in Ireland, went to school there, attended Trinity College, Dublin—and because a quarter of the eighty-odd pieces in his *Collected Stories* are set in Ireland or are peopled by Irish characters living abroad, usually in England.[1] He himself has for many years lived and written in Devon.

The term "Anglo-Irish" usually either embraces the members and descendants of the Protestant Ascendancy like Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory—prime movers in the Irish Literary Revival; or it brings to mind the fiction written by that wonderful team of cousins who called themselves Somerville and Ross, authors of the "Irish R.M." stories, whose masterpiece was the novel *The Real Charlotte*. A somewhat imprecise Celtic mythologizing tendency is evoked in the one case; decrepit country houses, hunt balls, and a Faulknerian preoccupation with lineage in the other.

To associate Trevor with the *milieu* conjured up by the term "Anglo-Irish" would be a mistake. For one thing, the Anglo-Irish tradition itself has since the nineteenth century become increasingly attenuated. As early as the 1860s, Gladstone's disestablishment of the (Protestant) Church of Ireland, his Land Acts—and later those of Balfour—in response to the agitations associated with Parnell, together with Conservative adoption of land reform policies, drastically liberalized the landlord-and-tenant system that had ruled the island since Henry VIII and Elizabeth I revoked the legitimacy of the native Irish nobility, making them swear fealty to and draw their legitimacy from the Crown.

The history of Ireland after the land reform movement was one of Protestant return to England in the face of an Ireland that increasingly defined itself, especially under DeValera's Irish Republic, as Gaelic, agrarian, and Catholic. The Protestants who have remained in the Irish Republic are an isolated remnant. (For readers unfamiliar with Irish life, the terms Protestant and Catholic imply social distinctions as much as matters of faith.) Trevor's understanding of the lives of Irish Protestants hints at a broader identification with an element of humanity psychologically marginalized, passed-over, alienated. And since Trevor's characters and settings are in fact more often English than they are Irish, he might be more accurately though more long-windedly identified as "Protestant-Irish and English."

On this side of the Atlantic we are accustomed to seeing the Emerald Isle through

1 *William Trevor: The Collected Stories*; Viking, 1,261 pages, $35.

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a haze of sentimentality which Irish-Americans have led us to feel for the country which they, usually for very sound reasons, have left. The reality, of course, is that life for the majority of those who live in Ireland, particularly in the provinces, has been an unending struggle to make ends meet within a farming economy which offers little diversion. Bridie, in Trevor's early story "The Ballroom of Romance," cares for her widowed father, who is handicapped with an amputated leg, on a small farm like so many in the country. The narrowness of this life, particularly back in the Forties and Fifties, is from an American point of view almost impossible to grasp.

As drab as life in the nearby town is, Bridie still fantasizes about it: "The town had a cinema called the Electric, and a fish-and-chip shop where people met at night, eating chips out of newspaper on the pavement outside. In the evenings, sitting in the farmhouse with her father, she often thought about the town, imagining the shop-windows lit up to display their goods and the sweet-shops still open so that people could purchase chocolates or fruit to take with them to the Electric cinema. But the town was eleven miles away, which was too far to cycle, there and back, for an evening's entertainment." Instead she cycles once a week to a grim little place called The Ballroom of Romance, dancing and socializing with the same crowd of bachelors and spinsters who frequent the place, trying to attract the attention of the drummer in the band, Dano Ryan. Dano is not interested, however. "Once, at the end of an evening, she'd pretended that there was a puncture in the back wheel of her bicycle and he'd concerned himself with it while Mr Maloney and Mr Swanton waited for him in Mr Maloney's car. He'd blown the tyre up with the car pump and had said he thought it would hold."

While there is plenty of humor in Trevor's writing, he seldom condescends to his characters, but pays laconic tribute to their stoicism and decency. Bridie's evening at The Ballroom of Romance is revealed, but only at the end of the story, to have been her last night there. When the dance hall closes, she allows the old bachelor Bowser Egan to accompany her and even to kiss her in a field along the way, after he has, in the reticent and even coded manner of these tradition-bound people, indicated he would marry her once his mother had died, leaving him the small farm where mother and son live. Marriage, as is often the case in these Irish stories, represents a sort of resigned acquiescence in the social realities of a very constricted way of life. After the chaste and sad little exchange in the field, Bowser and Bridie mount their bikes and part. Without any flourish of either exultation or self-pity, Bridie has set into motion a major decision in her circumscribed life. "She rode through the night as on Saturday nights for years she had ridden and never would ride again because she'd reached a certain age. She would wait now and in time Bowser Egan would seek her out because his mother would have died. Her father would probably have died also by then. She would marry Bowser Egan because it would be lonesome being by herself in the farmhouse."

In "The Property of Colette Nervi," a story published some twenty years later, another rural Irish marriage of convenience—between a farmer and the daughter of a shopkeeper—is made affordable with money the farmer has stolen from a purse some French tourists have left sitting on top of their rental car. The French people have come to look at the little settlement's one touristic claim to fame, Drumgawnie Rath, "a ring of standing stones that predated history." One irony in the story is that people will come from all over Europe to see these unimpressive stones, though "a visitor who had spent the whole afternoon examining them and had afterwards returned to the shop to verify the way to the Rossaphin road has stated that they were the most extraordinary stones of their kind in the whole of Europe. 'I think he was maybe drunk,' Dolores's mother had commented, and her father had agreed." The stolen money will allow Henry Garvey, who will inherit a rundown old farm, to marry the

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crippled Dolores, who will inherit the shop at the crossroads, in a marriage ceremony where the arm-support of the crutch will be decorated in white lace. "Dolores thought she'd never seen a crutch look so pretty, and wondered if it was a marriage tradition for crippled brides, but did not ask." This last phrase is emblematic of so much in the repressive society that Trevor chronicles, where much is understood and little is spoken.

"An Evening with John Joe Dempsey" gives an insight into the life and mind of a character thoroughly out of sync with the pieties of his town. The story begins with John Joe's being sent by his widowed mother on an errand to the combination pub/grocery store that one still finds in rural Ireland—the kind of place where Himself drinks a pint while Herself does the shopping. "Mr Lynch, now a large, fresh-faced man of fifty-five who was never seen without a brown hat on his head," who works as a clerk in a meal business, lives with his seventy-nine-year-old mother, and spends his evenings drinking in Keogh's public house, buys the fifteen-year-old boy his first bottle of stout and decides to give him some advice, starting off with some stories about the "glory girls" of London, where he was stationed while serving with the British Army. The preamble of Mr. Lynch's words of wisdom would capture any boy's attention:

> "If your daddy was alive today, he would be telling you a thing or two in order to prepare you for your manhood and the temptations in another country. Your mother wouldn't know how to tackle a matter like that, nor would Father Ryan, nor the Christian Brothers. Your daddy might have sat you down in this bar and given you your first bottle of stout. He might have told you about the facts of life."

John Joe knows exactly what he wants to hear about: "Did one of the glory girls entice yourself, Mr Lynch?" To John Joe's intense disappointment, though, and in one of the wry twists that William Trevor specializes in, the point of the story is that, faced with the "glory girl," Mr. Lynch has a vision of the Blessed Virgin! "As soon as the glory girl said we'd drink the beer before we got down to business I saw . . . the Holy Mother, as clear as if [she] was in front of me." "I couldn't repeat," he adds, "what the glory girl said when I walked away." But the reader can guess.

What a bring-down for the young man! Typical of Trevor's comic sense is Mr. Lynch's summing-up remark: "The facts of life is one thing, John Joe, but keep away from dirty women." Not to worry. John Joe has at fifteen learned to say what is expected of him.

> "You have pimples on your chin," said Mr Lynch in the end. "I hope you're living a clean life now."
>
> "A healthy life, Mr Lynch."
>
> "It is a question your daddy would ask you. You know what I mean? There's some lads can't leave it alone."
>
> "They go mad in the end, Mr Lynch."

John Joe's mother and everyone else wonders why the lad spends so much time in the company of the town idiot, a dwarf named Quigley. Brother Leahy questions him sharply about the dwarf: "Tell me this, young fellow-me-lad, what kind of a conversation do you have with old Quigley?" They talked, John Joe said, about trees and flowers and hedgerows. He liked to listen to Quigley, he said, because Quigley had acquired a knowledge of such matters. But not even Mr. Lynch is dumb enough to fall for that one. John Joe's private view is that "Quigley, a bachelor also, was a happier man than Mr Lynch. He lived in what amounted to a shed at the bottom of his niece's garden. Food was carried to him, but there were few, with the exception of John Joe, who lingered in his company." Like John Joe himself, Quigley spends most of his time thinking what it would be like to have sex with the ladies of the town, spying on them, and spinning fabulous tales about their intimate lives: "Quigley's voice might continue for an hour and a half, for there was hardly a man and his wife in the town whom he didn't claim to

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have observed in intimate circumstances. John Joe did not ever ask how, when there was no convenient shed to climb on to, the dwarf managed to make his way to so many exposed upstairs windows. Such a question would have been wholly irrelevant."

In a series of hilarious vignettes, Trevor retails John Joe's fantasies, each of which, simmering just beneath the surface of his imagination, involves being seduced by one of the married ladies of the town. When his mother gives him his father's old fountain pen as a birthday present, he finds himself writing, as a way of testing the pen, *It's hot in here. Wouldn't you take off your jersey?* "That's a funny thing to write," his mother says. "It came into my head," is his reply.

The end of "An Evening with John Joe Dempsey" follows the boy to his room, where he "looked with affection at his bed, for in the end there was only that." Our sympathies are with the boy, because in the face of the town's repression and compromise, his fantasy life embodies his only sanity: "He travelled alone, visiting in his way the women of the town, adored and adoring, more alive in his bed than he ever was at the Christian Brothers' School, or in the grey Coliseum [the cinema], or in the chip-shop, or Keogh's public house, or his mother's kitchen, more alive than ever he would be at the sawmills. In his bed he entered a paradise: it was grand being alone."

The closest Trevor gets in his short stories to an atmosphere that might be called, in the terms I have delineated above, "Anglo-Irish," is in a poignant piece called "The Distant Past," which tells the story of an old brother and sister who live on in their dilapidated Georgian manor house, with its leaky roof and family crest and Cross of St. George displayed in the front hall—all that remains of an estate call Carraveagh. "The Middletons of Carraveagh the family had once been known as, but now the brother and sister were just the Middletons, for Carraveagh didn't count any more, except to them." On the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1952, they drove into town with a small Union Jack displayed in the rear window of their car.

The Church of Ireland (Anglican) Middletons have always enjoyed affectionate relations with the Catholic Irish of the town, their loyalties to the imperial past being smiled on as harmless eccentricities. Of the display of the flag on coronation day: "'Be-dad, you're a holy terror, Mr Middleton!' Fat Cranley laughingly exclaimed, noticing the flag as he lifted a tray of pork steaks from his display shelf." Part of the irony is that Fat Cranley, during the Irish War of Independence, actually fought against the British, showing up at Carraveagh with a shotgun in expectation of a battle with British troops, and locking up the family in an upstairs room. But as the Troubles of the Easter Rising and Civil War period faded into memory the town could laugh about those events, the Middletons amiably taking their place as "harmlessly peculiar," cobwebby museum pieces who give the town a bit of tone. Everyone has been able to accept this transition through which the Middletons have gone from being part of the ruling class to being two old relics of the past. "On Fridays, when they took seven or eight dozen eggs to the town, they dressed in pressed tweeds and were accompanied over the years by a series of red setters, the breed there had always been at Carraveagh."

As the older brother and sister have declined in the world, the new Ireland has prospered, becoming less a poor province of Britain and more a part of Europe, with a growing tourist trade: "the wife of a solicitor, a Mrs Duggan, began to give six o'clock parties once or twice a year, obliging her husband to mix gin and Martini in glass jugs and herself handing round a selection of nuts and small Japanese crackers." Trevor effortlessly sketches a three-paragraph history of the newly prosperous Irish Republic. As for the Middletons: "Dimly, but with no less loyalty, they still recalled the distant past and were listened to without ill-feeling when they spoke of it and of Carraveagh as it had been, and of the Queen whose company their careless father had known."

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The trouble arises when the distant past stops being distant. "We can disagree without guns" was the gospel here, "the result of living in a Christian country." "That the Middletons bought their meat from a man who had once locked them into an upstairs room and had then waited to shoot soldiers in their hall was a fact that amazed the seasonal visitors." Then the new Troubles begin, with Protestant attacks on Catholic neighborhoods and the rebirth of the old IRA as a brutal revolutionary force; the rise of the Protestant paramilitaries—as bad or worse than the IRA; and the murders and retaliations. Since the town lies a scant sixty miles from the Ulster border, tourism falls off and the town's hard-won prosperity starts to ebb. The Middletons start being snubbed: "It was as though, going back nearly twenty years, people remembered the Union Jack in the window of their car and saw it now in a different light. It wasn't something to laugh at any more, nor were certain words that the Middletons had gently spoken, nor were they themselves just an old, peculiar couple." The humor, the affection, the very human accommodation between old antagonists —all of them caught between conflicting social forces over which they have no control—disappear now, in a past that has suddenly become present. "Because of the distant past they would die friendless. It was worse than being murdered in their beds."

Historians and political commentators, particularly on the left, like to speak of the Irish condition since Independence as "post-colonial"; and Irish society does exhibit some of the signs of a people still shaking off the shadows of foreign domination. Attitudes toward government and toward secular authority figures, for example, are strikingly ambivalent. But the English and the Scots were always too close to the Irish to be thought of as colonizers in the classic model. Trevor brings a subtlety of insight to the relations between Ireland and "the other island." Take Norah and Dermot of "Another Christmas." Irish by birth, they have emigrated shortly after their marriage and are now permanently settled in England. "Their children spoke with London accents. Patrick and Brendan worked for English firms and would make their homes in England. Patrick had married an English girl. They were Catholics and they had Irish names, yet home for them was not Waterford." In this they typify many Irish people who live in England.

The crisis of the story arises from the unspoken understanding that their landlord, Mr. Joyce (an Irish name, though the man seems not to have Irish sympathies), will for the first time in years not be coming to Christmas dinner. Norah is planning to deliver a present to him, sensing he won't come—though Mr. Joyce has not said no, and Dermot insists, "I'd say there was no need to go round with the tie, Norah. I'd say he'd make the effort on Christmas Day." (Trevor has a wonderful ear for the Irish conditional tense.) The estrangement has come about because of words spoken while the three were watching a television news report of "another outrage"—an IRA bombing. When Mr. Joyce said that he "couldn't understand the mentality of people like that . . . killing just anyone, destroying life for no reason," Dermot had countered that "they mustn't of course forget what the Catholics in the North had suffered. The bombs were a crime but it didn't do to forget that the crime would not be there if generations of Catholics in the North had not been treated as animals."

Can anyone who knows his history disagree with that? The story dramatizes how the lives of these London Irish are impinged upon by the Troubles. Norah, caught between two nations, "felt she should be out on the streets, shouting in her Waterford accent, violently stating that the bombers were more despicable with every breath they drew, that hatred and death were all they deserved." At the same time her husband faces the possibility of losing his job as a meter-reader for North Thames Gas because men with Irish accents make people nervous these days. Still Norah resents his statement about Irish history because "[t]heir harmless elderly land-

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lord might die in the course of that same year, a friendship he had valued lost, his last Christmas lonely." We can see how families, friendships, lives are affected by the continuing butchery in the North, a conflict that dates back over many centuries.

Politics, history, and social class engage Trevor's imagination not in and of themselves, but because of the way they affect people's lives. Though Northern Ireland or even Ireland is certainly not an obsession for him, Trevor has written other stories that get right into the belly of the beast. In "Attracta," the title character, a Protestant schoolteacher, has somehow managed to put into the back of her mind the death of her own parents when she was three years old—they were shot down by mistake in an ambush the Nationalist insurgents had planned for the Black and Tans. In the aftermath the man responsible for the ambush has become Attracta's protector, and Attracta only learns of her parents' death when she is eleven, from a bitter, somewhat deranged old man in the town. She has managed somehow to repress all feelings toward the Troubles of the 1920s until by chance she reads in a newspaper of the suicide of an Englishwoman whose husband, an army officer, was murdered by the IRA, who decapitated him and sent his head to her in the mail. Then Attracta loses control of what she has repressed all these years, goes off her head a bit and begins to talk to her pupils about the horror that lies just beneath the surface of Irish history, the horror that most people successfully ignore. The next day the Protestant Archdeacon kindly convinces Attracta to take early retirement.

In "Beyond the Pale," Cynthia, an Englishwoman on vacation in Northern Ireland with her husband, his mistress of many years, and her husband's best friend, becomes hysterical after hearing the story of a local Irishman's former girlfriend who has been killed in England in some obscure plot between the rival terrorist groups. The man drowns himself in the sea just outside the hotel where the foursome vacation, because this is where he and his girlfriend had come as children. This sends Cynthia off on a mad ramble about Irish history, in the course of which she spills the beans about her husband's affair. His mistress, who narrates the story, is more upset about this revelation than about the tragedies of Irish history: "Why couldn't it have been she who had gone down to the rocks and slipped on the seaweed or just walked into the sea, it didn't matter which? Her awful rigmarole hung about us as the last of the tea things were gathered up—the earls who'd fled, the famine and the people planted. The children were there too, grown up into murdering riff-raff."

The stickiest problem of Irish history is, writ large, the same impulse that Trevor worries relentlessly in many if not most of his stories—the impulse to hide, to suppress, to lie. I have dwelt on the specifically Irish and Irish-English sides of Trevor's work, but his preoccupation with repression and with loaded secrets is by no means limited to the national and ethnic context. He gives human nature a wide berth, sometime turning an amused eye to our duplicities, but more often adopting a rather severe if not bitter tone. Disillusionment is the characteristic mode of this most acute observer of the human condition.

The seasoned reader of Trevor's work, upon opening a story called "A Happy Family," braces himself for the "attitude adjustment" that is surely waiting in the wings, even at the moment when ordinary human contentment is being masterly evoked in passages like this: "I remember sitting in the number 73 bus, thinking of the day as I had spent it and thinking of the house I was about to enter. It was a fine evening, warm and mellow, the air heavy with the smell of London. The bus crossed Hammersmith Bridge, moving quite quickly towards the leafy avenues beyond." In a house in those leafy avenues lives a woman who will soon begin receiving phone calls from a Mr. Higgs, who uncannily knows all the secrets of her life: a caller who turns out to be imaginary—the midlife version of an imaginary childhood figure. When the woman has to be "put away" for her mental illness, her hus-

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band cannot help being disconcerted by the fact that their daughter also has an imaginary friend. "I stopped the car by our house," the story ends, "thinking that only death could make the house seem so empty, and thinking too that death was easier to understand. We made tea, I remember, the children and I, not saying very much more."

In the world inhabited by William Trevor's characters, the happy family is either transitory or illusory, or simply does not exist. In one of my favorite stories, "Mr McNamara," Trevor creates over the space of four pages a golden picture of childhood in an Irish town in the Midlands, content despite having come somewhat down in the world. "As a family we belonged to the past. We were Protestants in what had become Catholic Ireland. We'd once been part of an ascendancy, but now it was not so. Now there was the income from the granary and the mill, and the house we lived in: we sold grain and flour, we wielded no power. 'Proddy-woddy green-guts,' the Catholic children cried at us in Curransbridge. 'Catty, Catty, going to Mass,' we whispered back, 'riding on the devil's ass.' They were as good as we were." The family: a son and three daughters, "and Flannagan in the garden and Bridget our maid, and the avuncular spirit of Mr McNamara."

The parents are as good a pair as one could hope for: "when they disagreed or argued their voices weren't ever raised. They could be angry with us, but not with one another. They meted out punishments for us jointly, sharing disapproval or disappointment. We felt doubly ashamed when our misdemeanours were uncovered." The father is a large, "bulky" man who drinks from an extra-large teacup. And what is the significance of his having a special knife and fork, "extra-strong because my father was always breaking forks"? Throughout the narrator's childhood there are the father's visits to Dublin, a regular feature of which would be his visits in the bar of Fleming's Hotel with his friend Mr. McNamara: "The whole thing occurred once every month or so, the going away in the first place, the small packed suitcase in the hall, my father in his best tweed suit, Flannagan and the dog-cart. And the returning a few days later: breakfast with Mr McNamara, my sister Charlotte used to say"—because during breakfast the morning after he returned, the father would recount all the Dublin news, along with Mr. McNamara's views of it all, and the endlessly complicated though rather ordinary stories of Mr. McNamara's family, who lived in a house "in Palmerston Road, and the dog they had, a spaniel called Wolfe Tone, and a maid called Kate O'Shea, from Skibbereen."

Mr. McNamara even sends the boy a thirteenth-birthday present. Trevor has a delightful way of making a detail stand out: "One by one my presents were placed before me, my parents' brought from the sideboard by my mother. It was a package about two and a half feet long, a few inches in width. It felt like a bundle of twigs and was in fact the various parts of a box-kite. Charlotte had bought me a book called *Dickon the Impossible*, Amelia a kaleidoscope. 'Open mine exceedingly carefully,' Frances said. I did, and at first I thought it was a pot of jam. It was a goldfish in a jar." How much these details tell us of the care with which life was managed in this household! "Open mine exceedingly carefully" is redolent of the long-vanished rectitude and precision of language of the cloistered Anglo-Irish provincial middle class. Mr. McNamara's gift, though, is the best of all: a little dragon made of brass, with "two green eyes that Frances said were emeralds, and small pieces let into its back which she said looked like rubies." The boy is enjoined to write a thank-you note. "Give me the letter when you've done it," his father says. "I have to go up again in a fortnight."

But his father dies the next day—"a grim nightmare of a day, during all of which someone in the house was weeping, and often several of us together." Interestingly, Mr. McNamara, through the mother's intercession, is not informed: "My father and Mr McNamara had been bar-room friends, [Mother] pointed out: letters in either direction would not be in order." From then on,

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the boy's mission in life is to grow up and replace his father as owner of the granary and mill, and to further his education he is sent to a Protestant boarding school in the Dublin mountains. Eventually he works up his courage to make up an excuse to go into Dublin —"'An uncle,' I said to the small headmaster. 'Passing through Dublin, sir.'"—so that he can see Fleming's Hotel for himself.

The inevitable occurs. In one of the most exquisitely bittersweet scenes in fiction, the boy cycles up to Fleming's Hotel and goes in. "A tall grandfather clock ticked, the fire occasionally hissed. There was a smell of some kind of soup. It was the nicest, most comfortable hall I'd ever been in." He proceeds into the bar, empty except for the barman and "a woman sitting by the fire drinking orange-coloured liquid from a small glass. Behind the bar a man in a white jacket was reading the *Irish Independent*." The boy manages to order a bottle of ale, his first encounter with the stuff, and as he drinks it, waiting for Mr. McNamara to appear, he notices that the woman is looking at him, and he wonders in his naïve way if she might be a prostitute: "A boy at school called Yeats claimed that prostitutes hung about railway stations mostly, and on quays. But there was of course no reason why you shouldn't come across one in a bar . . . Yet she seemed too quietly dressed to be a prostitute."

Eventually the woman gets up and leaves, "and on her way from the bar she passed close to where I was sitting. She looked down and smiled at me." After she has left, the boy asks the barman who she is. And when the man says, "That's Nora McNamara," the reader finds he is really not surprised, remembering the little brass dragon —which is more a woman's gift than a man's—and the mother's insistence that Mr. McNamara not be notified of her husband's death, suggesting that she shared with him the fiction of "Mr." McNamara's identity.

What is perhaps even more absorbing for the student of human nature than this discovery is the boy's bitter reaction to it. As much as the boy resents his father's having given the other woman's gifts to his children, "yet somehow it was not as great as the sin of sharing with all of us this other woman's eccentric household, her sister and her sister's husband, her alcoholic aunt, a maid and a dog"—the violation of the family's sanctity that comes from the intrusion of another reality into their midst, introduced under false pretenses. He relives all of it at home on Christmas morning:

> I hated the memory of him and how he would have been that Christmas morning; I hated him for destroying everything. It was no consolation to me then that he had tried to share with us a person he loved in a way that was different from the way he loved us. I could neither forgive nor understand. I felt only bitterness that I, who had taken his place, must now continue his deception, and keep the secret of his lies and his hypocrisy.

To be an adult is to be able to keep a tough secret. The boy has become a man.

William Trevor's keen eye illuminates the lives of the Irish, the Anglo-Irish, and also the English. The sequence of stories called "Matilda's England" is perhaps the best treatment of the English experience of World War II that I have ever read. But his vision transcends, as I have suggested, the various contexts within which he places his stories. Taken as a whole, his fiction makes a strong assertion about human nature, as an observer of which Trevor is unsparing, not given to the epiphanies we associate with other great Irish short-story writers such as James Joyce and Frank O'Connor. There is humor here, and certain moments that glow with the enjoyment of life, perfectly rendered into beautiful prose. But reading these stories one after the other can be a sobering and chastening experience. They have kept me awake at night. The reader is not advised to read consecutively, as I have done over the past several months, the twelve hundred pages of *The Collected Stories*. These are meant to be absorbed one at a time. But once the stories become part of one's mind and life, there's no shaking them.

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Joseph Needham & the history of Chinese science

by Maurice Cowling

Joseph Needham, biochemist and historian, is ninety-two and has not yet completed the most remarkable academic career in twentieth-century England. His memorial will be *Science and Civilization in China*, which ranks with Toynbee's *A Study of History*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and Havelock Ellis's *The Psychology of Sex* among the monuments of liberal scholarship. Like all such monuments, Needham's major work drives a small number of ideas about thought, politics, knowledge, and religion through an extraordinary range of material. The questions that arise are about the continuity between the vatic quality with which Needham has surrounded his interest in China since the 1940s and the vatic quality of his interest in biochemistry, science, religion, and politics before that.

By the time he began a four-year stint as Scientific Counsellor to the British Embassy in Chungking in 1942, Needham had published a large scientific work and what were to be the last of his research articles. Thereafter, he abandoned science and research articles. Almost all his future writing was to be an application to science, religion, and society in China of a doctrine which had originally been applied to science, religion, and society in England.

Volume I of *Science and Civilization in China*, which appeared in 1954, described China's economic geography and political history, and the contacts which China had had with India, Islam, and Western Europe, up to the fifteenth century. It also announced the structure at which Needham was to aim from Volume II onward in describing relations between Chinese achievements in the sciences and the religious, philosophical, and sociological framework of Chinese thought and life.

This announcement has been followed more or less as planned, though some of the volumes have mushroomed and others have been restructured in the process of composition. Since the concluding volume—*The Social Background*—has not been published and perhaps is yet to be written, any account of Needham's explanatory concepts must to some extent be provisional. It is unlikely, however, that *The Social Background* will alter the explanatory picture of which Needham has already made many statements, not only in *Science and Civilization in China* but also in *The Grand Titration*, *Within the Four Seas*, and *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West*.

What Needham brought to China was his already stated beliefs that Europeans in general, and scientists and Christians in particular, were suffused with spiritual pride, that European religion was objectionably supernatural, and that scientific wisdom was not necessarily superior to religious, ethical, and sociological wisdom. In explaining the disagreeable fact that science had not developed as rapidly in China as it had in Europe from the sixteenth century onward, he was

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led on to the more congenial question, why it had developed so successfully in China *before* the sixteenth century.

One thing that was not apparent in Needham's public *persona* in the early 1940s was any special sympathy for Chinese Communism as distinct from a sympathy for Communism generally. Whatever his role as a Cambridge Communist in the 1930s, his wartime mission to China was a mission of liaison with the Chiang Kai-shek regime. It was not until Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan in 1949 that Needham made definitive judgments against Chiang Kai-shek's perversion of the 1911 Revolution, the subjection of his "Christian democracy" to the "landowner-banker-comprador group," and the failure of his "new fascism" to deserve support against the Maoist revolution. These condemnations then merged into the condemnations Needham was to utter over the following forty years—of the American refusal to recognize Communist China, of American bombing of North-Korean industrial plants during the Korean war, and of American saturation-bombing of South Vietnam during the Vietnam war. For Needham, all were examples of the "dominance-psychology" of the West and its aggression toward the natural development of Chinese culture.

These arguments assumed that in China economic development was a *foreign* importation, that Communism was by no means as antipathetic to the modern Chinese as it was to English and American conservatives, and that the Chinese people, in "winning the civil war" and willing the attainment of socialism "at the earliest possible time," had been extending the "cohesiveness," anti-individualism, and feeling for "mutual aid" characteristic of "bureaucratic feudalism" and the historic Chinese mind.

Needham spelled out the reasons for thinking of Chinese Communism as the heir to Chinese history. He argued that peasant-China and, to some extent, classical China agreed with Marx that practice and theory —or manual and intellectual labor—should be united, and that Communism was likely to adapt its theories to the "concrete conditions of Chinese society," the absence of a "military" or "expansive" ethos, and the Confucian concern for the "juristic security of the individual." At the same time he spelled out the reasons for admiring the Communist regime—that the rural communes of the late 1950s were trying to recapture that "social solidarity" which had been a "motivating force" in Chinese society for two millennia; that the Cultural Revolution was a natural reaction against the "capitalist tendencies" of the early 1960s, which had needed an "altruistic social morality" to resist them; and that, in the age of artificial intelligence, biological engineering, and atomic physics, Europeans and Americans had something to learn from the "saints and sages" of China. Even the Chinese interest in acquiring atomic weapons did not dent the belief Needham expressed to the Student Revolutionaries of the 1960s that "Scientism" was a "Euro-American disease" which China had never experienced, that Mao Tse-tung was a "social and ethical philosopher" rather than a "military man," and that it might well be China's world-role to "restore humanistic values based on all the forms of human experience."

Needham's mother was the author of the famous song *Nellie Dean*; his father was a distinguished doctor and an Anglo-Catholic of Quaker sympathies. Needham himself attended the Oundle School during the headmastership of F. W. Sanderson, who was a friend and admirer of H. G. Wells, and was a medical undergraduate at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, of which he became a Fellow in 1924, and, apart from ten years as Master, has been a Fellow ever since.

As to the provenance of his thought and the early direction of his mind, Needham has specified many influences, among whom Gowland Hopkins was pre-eminent in biochemistry, Collingwood, Inge, Noel, Bishop Barnes, F. C. Burkitt, E. G. Browne, and Otto were pre-eminent in religion, and James Ward, Whitehead, Blake, Lotze, Mach, Havelock Ellis, Bernal, D. H. Law-

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rence, Carpenter, H. G. Wells, and Shaw were pre-eminent intellectually. Needham's mixture, however, has always been his own, and has been displayed in three stages—through the two hundred or so technical papers and four large volumes which he published about biochemistry between 1925 and 1942, through the sketch he gave of the nature of religious and scientific enquiry up to 1931, and through the insertion he effected in the 1930s of an ethical, political, and sociological doctrine which had not really been present previously.

Chemical Embryology, *Biochemistry and Morphogenesis*, and the biochemical papers were based ultimately on research done by Needham himself or by other biochemists in the two or three decades before he went to China in 1942. It was only in informal essays and books that he contextualized biochemistry, confined it to its proper sphere, and insisted that it should be conducted, indeed was being conducted, by almost all existing research workers, according to methods that were mathematical and mechanistic.

These adjectives were negative and critical. They reminded "philosophically-minded biologists," like J. B. S. Haldane, that the invention of neo-vitalism in order to explain "those aspects of animal life most difficult to deal with psychochemically" had ignored the "vast army of physiologists, zoologists, embryologists and biochemists who . . . had been . . . 'getting on with the job'" in laboratories and professional journals, and had been right not only to ignore "teleology," "entelechies," and "hormic" urges but also to treat Man as a machine which had to be dealt with "under . . . the headings of number, measure, weight, intensity or capacity."

Needham's ultimate conclusion in the 1920s was a criticism of the "over-specialization" of "philosophically naïve scientists." His immediate conclusions were more constricting—that scientific activity was an "abstraction" (i.e., the result of the decision to consider experience mathematically and mechanistically), that the knowledge acquired by research since the seventeenth century had been acquired therefore by "legitimate methodological distortion," and that laboratory research, though applicable to "any phenomenon whatever," did not correspond to "external nature," was neither art, religion, history, philosophy "nor an instrument of merely practical activity," but was a Kantian subjectivation or Vaihangerian fiction—a "special . . . department of the human spirit" which need not in the short run be affected, as Butterfield and Oakeshott[1] were saying about history at the same time in *The Whig Interpretation of History* and *Experience and Its Modes*, by anything the philosopher might say to "explain it or to explain it away."

These conclusions—the outcome of continuous research and reflection on research in a highly successful enterprise, the Cambridge Biochemistry Laboratory—included an emphasis on both the disjunction and the compatibility between scientific activity and philosophical, religious, and aesthetic activity. They led on to the belief that the task of the future, having protected the abstraction suitable to laboratory research, was to build on already existing demolitions of Huxley's, Tyndall's, and Spencer's naturalistic materialism, not by concocting "immiscible" mixtures like "Scientific Deism" or "the Religion of Science" but by protecting religion, art, and philosophy *against* science.

Needham was an Anglo-Catholic and spent a number of years testing his vocation to be a priest of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd in Cambridge. It is important, however, that he was a liturgical Anglo-Catholic, and that his Anglo-Catholicism did not exclude skepticism about the "direct telephonic communication with Omniscience" that he found in the "mental prisons . . . inhabited by the theologian and the mystic."

Needham agreed that philosophy and theology could have indirect effects on scientific assumptions. But he aimed in the first place to effect a defensive separation, denying scientific authority to "theologians

1 The latter a friend and colleague of Needham's at Caius.

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. . . mystics and . . . idealist philosophers," while affirming the existence of a vast field of thought and practice in which scientific abstraction was inoperative and Man could legitimately be understood as "Organism," "Personality," or "Child of God and . . . Inheritor of the City of Heaven."

Needham seemed sometimes to affirm that religion, art, and philosophy were merely different from science and not "higher." At other times he adopted the view that for "theologic religion" nothing which was important "could be proved by science." He added, moreover, that the retreat from philosophical naturalism had been matched by a retreat from objectivity in religion, as interest in mysticism had revived, the individual had replaced the Church as the focus of attention, and psychology and pragmatism had created a "more subjective standpoint" than had been possible in the nineteenth century. And since not only science but also religion had been both "subjectivated" and given an infusion of "humility" in the previous thirty years, each had become more compatible with the other in their search for that "unmoveable . . . reality . . . which . . . lay . . . behind the changing show of facts."

These propositions, elaborated with help from Wittgenstein, Holbein, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky, issued in the assertions that *methodological* materialism presented no obstacle to prayer and worship, and that the *great* philosophers had not been *philosophical* materialists. Above all, they issued in the assertion that religious experience, though as natural to man as singing or walking, was no more "in touch with the real" than scientific experience was, that "glib" claims to familiarity with God should be avoided, and that Christianity should no more be thought of as "the final religion" than "Einsteinian physics" or "Joycean prose" should be thought of as the "final physics" or the "final prose."

For most of the 1920s Needham's interests did not extend to ethics, politics, or sociology. He had been a volunteer-strikebreaker during the General Strike of 1926 but seems previously not to have taken very much interest in politics. Between 1929, when he joined the Labour Party, and Hitler's arrival in office in 1933, he acquired an ethical, political, and sociological dimension in which "individualism" became a dirty word and Hogben, Haldane, Bernal, Waddington, and Levy—socialist or Marxist scientists who were enemies of Christianity—became allies.

In the 1930s, Needham wrote to some extent as a Christian, to some extent as advocate of the combination of "intellectual" and "manual" capability characteristic of the scientific research worker. He also wrote positively as advocate of the philosophical account of science which he found in Whitehead and others, of the dialectical materialism which he found in Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and of the English identification between science, puritanism, and social equality which he found in Winstanley and the Diggers and Levellers of the seventeenth century.

These positions were interconnected in two major ways—insofar as he wished religion to turn into "social emotion," and insofar as he looked forward to the successive layers displayed in physical, mental, and social evolution achieving an even higher level in the new types of citizen-society of the future, where the "bacterial . . . protozoic . . . coloemic . . . endocrinic . . . osmo-regulatory . . . vertebral . . . conscious and toolmaking" levels of evolutionary integration would be completed by the "socialization of the means of production" in a "cooperative commonwealth" and "world society" from which the aggressiveness, female slavery and "warped . . . mental states" which were obstructing Engels's leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom, would have been abolished.

Needham anticipated Orwellian or Huxleyite hiccups, wrote feelingly about the hostility to science displayed by Karl Barth and D. H. Lawrence, and envisaged the prospect of a "scientifically stabilized stagnant class-stratified totalitarian social organism" enslaving "whole peoples . . . for generations . . . and destroying culture and learning" in

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the process. It was, he believed, only "ultimate" victory which was "inevitable"; but inevitable it was, whatever setbacks were being suffered in Spain, Germany, Italy, and Japan, and whatever damage might be done to the "great democracy" of the Soviet Union, since the "higher levels" of organization to which both science and Marxism looked forward would undoubtedly be achieved as private ownership and the profit-motive became obsolete.

In the 1920s Needham had been concerned primarily to protect religion against syncretism and Victorian naturalism. By 1931 he was saying that the religious period of European history was over, that religion was in for a "bad time during the next four or five centuries," and that the establishment of the scientist on the "semi-oracular tripod" once occupied by the priest had become irreversible. On the other hand, he was saying that, though religion would "never die," it should be edged out of its other-worldly ghetto, should make a "flesh-and-blood" contribution to the material millennium that science had made possible, and should make it its business to resist the "tyranny" of the "scientific experience" which science was imposing on the other forms of experience. By the time he and John Lewis edited *Christianity and the Social Revolution* in 1935, pluralist libertarianism had been joined by a very explicit Marxism.

Between 1935 and 1943 Needham defined the role of "the traditional religion of the European West" in the "coming world order." He rejected "retrograde asceticism," the mystical neo-Platonism to which Inge's *Plotinus* had to some extent persuaded him, and the anachronistic doctrines of "verbal inspiration, eternal damnation and the magical efficacy of prayer." He recognized that the "allegorical constructiveness" of historic theology had blunted the directness of Christ's commands, and that feudal lords and capitalist employers had used Christ as a "social opiate" for "proletarian misery." He also emphasized the importance which the Incarnation had given to Time and the certainty with which Isaiah on the one hand and Marx on the other [2] had agreed that God's Kingdom could be "realised . . . on earth."

To realize God's Kingdom on earth was said to be "sacramental," and science, Marx, and the early Christians to have been so much on one side in the pursuit of sacramentality, and Fascism to be so much on the other side, that Marxism was the "only possible moral theology" for the twentieth century. Marxism alone was capable of doing Christianity's work, it alone was "spreading comradeship, dignity, culture and happiness . . . to all working people," it alone could complete the transition that Christ had implied from the religion of fear as established by priests, through the religion of holiness as established by prophets, to the religion of love as the work of the Holy Spirit of a righteous order. Christianity was as compatible with materialism as psychology had suggested, as "the Blessed Sacrament of the Mass" had made clear, and as Teilhard de Chardin was later to be praised for pointing out. In identifying itself with a "scientific ethic" it would be "taking the 'love of our neighbour' seriously," setting women on an equality with men, and helping to abolish "privilege, bourgeois liberty . . . exploitation . . . private property . . . national wars, colonial exploitation and . . . the unequal distribution of goods, education and leisure" throughout the world.

Needham idealized his idols—Marxism's "regard for honesty . . . charity . . . truth . . . loyalty and art," the "sighs of . . . oppressed creatures" that he found in the folk songs, outlaws, and Morris-dancers whom puritans and businessmen had hated, and the use which the working classes would make of the leisure of which the ruling classes wished to go on depriving them. He praised the national cultural autonomy of Stalin's Soviet Union and distinguished not only between the "permanence" of dictatorship in Fascist states and the "transience" of dictatorship in Communist states but also between Fascist

2 Or, more strictly, Conrad Noel's Isaiah and John Macmurray's Marx.

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and Communist leadership as being respectively "leadership from above" and "leadership from within."

We need not be too critical. Needham was no sillier than Auden, Laski, John Strachey, Anthony Blunt, E. M. Forster, Bernard Shaw, or the Webbs. But his identification of Marxism with religion does raise a question.

If one asks how Needham conceived the future of religion in the 1930s, the answer is that, while more than happy for the "wonderful poetry of the liturgy" to survive the "world view" out of which it had been written, he doubted whether it *would* survive. Furthermore, he did not believe that existing churchgoers would be likely to welcome either the "new forms of social emotion" or the "clergy and people of the New Dispensation." What he wanted was recognition that Christianity, so far from being a "divine revelation," was "the human spirit . . . reacting to the facts of human destiny," that it would be succeeded in time by "another form of numinous feeling" and a "new development of social emotions," and that, indeed, as he stated in 1941, when "justice, love and comradeship" had been fully incorporated into social life, "society" would have been "sanctified," and religion "would pass . . . without loss . . . into social emotion as such."

In envisaging the death throes of existing religion, Needham denied that the new religion would be initiated in the "armchairs of literary critics," the "lecture rooms of academic philosophers," or "the speculations of scientific workers interested in religion from the outside." Even when half-suggesting that it might be initiated in the cinema and theater, or through the factory-system of post-capitalist cooperating producers, he made it clear that it would be indistinguishable from the social emotions that it would sustain. Increasingly, moreover, he pointed to similarities between his own conception of religion and the conception of religion that he described in the articles and books he was beginning to write about China.

Needham had used historical examples in the 1920s and had specified the seventeenth century as of central importance for the history of the modern world. But it was not until he took Marxism on board (after 1929) that he acquired the historical framework out of which he was eventually to think about China from 1942 onward.

In the 1930s and early 1940s Needham discussed two sets of historical events—the Levellers of the English Civil War as representatives of "the working masses" who had been unable to "push on" toward a "classless . . . or . . . socialist . . . state" because of the "inescapability" of "class distinctions" at that time, and the Renaissance, Reformation, and rise of modern science as "corresponding" to the transition from the "feudal economic system" to the "capitalist economic system."

Needham did not suggest that modern science was inseparable from capitalism and economic individualism; on the contrary he believed that it needed to be rescued from them. His argument, nevertheless, was that they had risen together, that the former could only be explained in relation to the latter, and that the apparently autonomous intellectual or religious developments which had occurred between Comenius's "Christian universalism" and Christian Socialism were *post facto* reflections of the "universal process" involved in the rise of "bourgeois capitalist nationalism and imperialism" out of the "obscurantist mediaevalism" which had preceded it.

Needham's first historical writing—the long historical disquisition in Volume I of *Chemical Embryology* in 1931—had not been sociologically oriented and had made little attempt at general explanation. Nor, though he had cooperated with Butterfield, Postan, and others in setting up the History of Science as a serious subject in Cambridge in the 1930s, did he give any full-scale account of the rise of science in Europe. All he had done by 1942 was to explain it in passing and to add that there was a problem about modern science's failure to emerge in China.

In the 1930s Needham had been interested in China and had referred approvingly to the influence which Taoism and Confucianism

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had had on Leibniz, the philosophes and the French Revolution. The arrival in his Laboratory in the course of the 1930s of Lu-Gwei Djen and other Chinese research students then encouraged him to add Chinese to the languages that he had already, and gave him the idea of writing an historical account of classical Chinese science. By 1942 all of his interests were engaged, and he began, a decade before Volume I of *Science and Civilization in China* was published, to give accounts of its significance.

In considering China's failure to develop the mathematically-based science which Europe developed after the sixteenth century, Needham began from a negative principle —that, since the reason could not be found in Europe's inherent superiority or China's inherent inferiority, it must be found in historical factors like the absence of city-states, the transition which China had made to an examination-based non-hereditary bureaucratic mandarinate in the third century B.C., and the intellectual superiority and ethical will with which the Confucian mandarinate had obstructed both capitalism and the seizure of the state by the merchant class subsequently.

These were represented as truths of high importance about Confucianism, about the Chinese mentality, and about modern science. It was pointed out that among Chinese religions only Buddhism was other-worldly and that Confucianism and Taoism were really "philosophies." It was the emphasis of the latter two on this world to the exclusion of the next that was of explanatory significance, negatively because it excluded the conception of a Creator who had made the laws of nature, positively because mathematical science in sixteenth-century Europe had developed in the shadow of this conception.

In Taoism, and in Lao Tzu's and Chauan Tzu's revolts against the "ethical rationalism" of Confucius, Needham saw similarities to Lucretius. He interpreted the Taoist insistence on "observing nature without preconceptions" and the Taoist belief in the "permeative" character of the "Order of Nature" as an intelligible parallel to Epicurean ataraxia, as a rejection of Confucianism's distaste for manual labor, and as a hermit-renunciation based on the belief that human society would never be restored until the Order of Nature was understood. In Taoism's replacement of "masculine" authoritarianism by a certain "feminine receptiveness," moreover, he recognized anticipations of the modern Western scientist's "intellectual humility . . . in face of Nature."

To Taoism Needham has been invariably friendly, even when its social ideal has been said to be based on pre-feudal tribalism and its intellectual connections to be with magic, alchemy, and the search for the elixir of life. The points he has emphasized is that science often arises out of magic, that Taoism is the "only systematic mysticism" which has not been anti-scientific, and that, by criticizing Confucian rationalism, it has proved that science and rationalism do not always go together. In spite of Taoism having been "at the bottom of most of the ancient and medieval sciences" which the Chinese had made their own, it was still, nevertheless, the case that it was Confucianism which raised the historical problem.

Needham is not in Chinese terms a Confucian. On the contrary, he is an "honorary Taoist," criticizing Confucianism for degenerating into "conventionality," and emphasizing the antinomianism which he identifies as Taoism's leading characteristic. But whereas, as he understands it, Buddhism, in spite of popular success and a revolutionary role, had always been foreign to the Chinese mind, bureaucracy and Confucianism had been the overwhelming facts in Chinese life and government for two millenia.

Confucianism was not, of course, a scientific philosophy. It discouraged "interest in the world outside human society" and was concerned exclusively with the ethical judgments appropriate to man's nature. It was a "paternalist" sociological philosophy—the "most social-minded humanistic doctrine that any part of the world had ever known." It conceptualized ethical and sociological

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justice within a "feudal" (or "bureaucratic-feudal") framework and was the instrument of a "scholar-gentry" which wished to open education to the talents. It had a "superiority-complex" which protected sedentary administrators from "artisans who did things with their hands" and responded to geographical and climatic challenges with that combination of graft, control, and cooperation which had been needed for hydraulic feudalism and the Asiatic mode of production.

Throughout his discussion of Confucianism, Needham has extolled its "civil" ethos (as against the aristocratic militarism of medieval Christianity), its Pelagian sinlessness (as against European Augustinianism), and its avoidance, by and large (in spite of the self-inflicted incineration of "a few Buddhist monks"), of witchcraft-mania and the Inquisitorial desire to "persecute" for the sake of opinion.

Confucianism, in other words, was neither an idealism nor a metaphysic, had no conception of a "creator God" or a "theological philosophy," and, though liturgical, was religion only in so far as it invoked a sense of the numinous, an "asceticism" which tended sometimes toward "prudery," and a universe which, in the absence of a Creator-God, was itself "moral."

In considering Confucian philosophy, Needham admired the "wonderful" synthesis which the neo-Confucians had effected between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the theory of integrative levels which had produced a harmoniously "organic" and "non-mechanical" evolutionary materialism in anticipation of both Darwin and Marx, and the "intrinsic logic" which had transcended the contradictions endemic in the "European" soul between "theological spiritualism and mechanical materialism" on the one hand, and between papal authority and imperial authority on the other.

Confucianism, of course, reflected the sociological situation in which slavery did not exist, the widespread availability of the crossbow had put a brake on Imperial authoritarianism, and the mandarinate's primary function had been to persuade the people to pay their taxes. In spite of a Marxist emphasis on material factors, however, the intellectual argument was put as strongly as the sociological, the place of science in Confucian, Taoist, Legalist, Mohist, Logical, and Naturalist thought was discussed at length, and feudal and post-feudal Confucianism and the fascism of the Legalists appeared as enemies of science, while anti-feudal Taoism, the "chivalrous military pacifism" of the Mohists, and the "organic naturalism" of the Yin-Yang Chia, appeared as its friends and proponents.

In the battle between Confucianism and Taoism, Needham made it obvious which side he was on. Confucius had combined a revolutionary belief that education and the bureaucracy should be open to the talents with a doctrine of "this-worldly social-mindedness" which, so far as social justice could be conceived of within a feudal framework, had included a concern for social justice. But basically Confucianism had been "rationalistic" and anti-supernatural, had taught an ethical doctrine which assumed that Man was more interesting than Nature and had established Pelagianism as the orthodoxy where the Augustinianism of the Hsun Ching was the heresy. Confucianism, indeed, though ambivalent toward science, had been so far from being "theological" that "even when established as a cult, it had had no theologians to resent, as Christian theologians were to resent, the "scientific view of the world," and was able, therefore, rather to "turn away . . . from . . . the investigation of Nature" than positively to attack it, as Christian theology was to attack it in the West.

In explaining Chinese science, Needham took his stand on the primordial Taoism which had existed before its "agnostic Naturalism" had been turned into theist, supernatural ecclesiasticism. Taoism had retained the ideal of a cooperative village-collectivism which had predated private property and the "proto-feudalism" of the Bronze Age. Where Confucianism and Legalism had been "masculine, managing,

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hard, dominating, aggressive, rational and donative," it had been feminine, tolerant, yielding, permissive, withdrawing, and "receptive," had asserted that a Confucian order could not be introduced into human society without a profounder knowledge of Nature than Confucians were willing to pursue, and, in laying the foundations for Chinese chemistry, mineralogy, botany, zoology, and pharmaceutics, had amalgamated not only science, magic, alchemy, and nature-mysticism but also the search for personal immortality through gymnastic, helio-therapeutic, respiratory, sexual, and dietary techniques, as well as through shamanism, which "the masses" had for many generations preferred to the "state religion encouraged by the Confucians."

The Tao of Taoism, therefore, as opposed to the Confucian Tao, was "the way in which the universe worked." It was mystically and psychologically preferable to Confucianism, was outside the "charmed circle" of "feudal aristocratic philosophy" and "bureaucratic literary culture," and took an antinomian and revolutionary view of the distortions and prejudices of Confucian social philosophy. Even more to the point, its interest in science involved it in "manual work and technology" and enabled it to "bridge the gap," which the Confucian literati could not begin to bridge, between the scholar and the artisan.

In specifying the content of Taoist philosophy, Needham emphasized the "eternity and uncreatedness" of the Tao, the impartiality and universal applicability of scientific method, and the need to detach judgments of truth from ethical judgments. "Cognoscere causas" was the Taoist motto, and Taoism's aim to prevent action "contrary to nature" through that "peace of mind which came from . . . formulating a theory or hypothesis . . . of the terrifying manifestations of the natural world" by which "the frail structure of human society" was surrounded.

Taoism thus had a positive as well as a negative aspect. It not only rejected "forcing," it also asserted the importance of "letting things work out their destinies in accordance with their intrinsic principles." This was the root of both Taoist ataraxia and Taoist empiricism, and it issued in the claim that disregard of "causes and intrinsic principles in Nature would lead to failure."

Needham emphasized Taoism's belief in "mutual service," the contrast between Confucian "stability" and its own embryonic evolutionism, and its association with all the revolutions which had endeavored to "overthrow the established order for more than a thousand years." Taoism was "of the extreme left," was the philosophy of those who had failed in society, and maintained the memory of the "legendary rebels" who had resisted the "antisocial" practice of "accumulating wealth for private ends." Most important of all, Taoism by origin was an organic philosophy which had the supreme merit of treating women as equal to men, of encompasssing the incompatibility between science and democracy, and of avoiding Europe's "schizophrenia" between "hedonistic materialism on the one hand and . . . theological spiritualism on the other."

Throughout his Chinese writings, Needham has been as determined as Toynbee to belittle Western mentalities and to supply Chinese homilies about their improvement. He has taken it for granted that China had had to reject "dogmatic . . . ecclesiastical and . . . transcendental" Christianity when presented with it in the eighth, thirteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries and that Europeans, though stuck with Christianity, would have to give up the idea of the "visible . . . church" extending itself "to all mankind," since the "invisible" Church, including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, and many other manifestations of the Holy Spirit, probably "covered . . . the earth . . . already" even though Christians did not realize it.

Needham has wished it to be known that he is neither a Comtean, a Theosophist, nor an admirer of "synthetic brews of human experience," and that he has not been advocating "a world union of faiths" or "the reunion of the churches." He also wishes it to be

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known that no one can be a "full person" without a religion, and that *everyone* should adopt the religious "matrix."

Needham claimed that he would have "liked" to join C. S. Lewis in making "the Christian ethic" the "guiding beacon for humanity." But he did no such thing, not only because of the difficulty involved in disentangling Christianity's "eternal gospel" from the "fears . . . and prejudices" of ages "more ignorant and powerless than our own" but also because it was with the unforced humanism embodied in all the Chinese religions, and especially in Taoism, that the Christians of the West, instead of "exalting themselves as sole possessors of all truth," should "sit down in the lowest room" and make an effort at "greater mutual understanding."

Liberal scholarship needs ideas. But they do not have to be very sensible ideas, so long as they are applied relentlessly and fluently, and it is impossible to withhold admiration for the relentlessness and fluency with which Needham has spread an English doctrine upon the world. It is equally impossible to avoid amazement at the assumption that his very English, and rather simple, mixture of Marxism, sociology, and Anglo-Catholicism can really provide a subtle structure for so long and complicated a subject as the history of Chinese science.

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Forever young: Frédéric Bazille

by Karen Wilkin

The entry in the *Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré* says only "Bazille (Frédéric), peintre impressionniste français, né à Montpellier (1841-1870)." Nothing more to be said about a man that Camille Pissarro, a mature painter ten years Bazille's senior, described as "one of the most gifted among us." By contrast, the entry on Bazille's friend and contemporary Claude Monet reads "peintre français, né à Paris (1841-1926). Poète de la lumière, chef et representant typique de l'impressionnisme; auteur des *Nymphéas* (Orangerie), *Les Peupliers*, *Vues de Vetheuil*." There's even a photo of the man himself, one of Nadar's portraits with the cropped hair and bushy beard. The point? Obviously, that Monet outlived his colleague by more than half a century, ample time in which to establish himself as a poet of light. It's worth noting, too, that not one of the three series identified by those codifiers of French culture, the editors of *Larousse*, as Monet's most characteristic and significant achievements—the *Waterlilies*, the *Poplars*, the *Views of Vetheuil*—was painted before Monet turned forty. That was in 1880, a decade after poor Bazille was killed, a week short of his twenty-ninth birthday, in the carnage of the Franco-Prussian War.

Bazille had been painting for a brief eight years, most of them, if not precisely as a student, at least as a rookie. Did he have time to fulfill the promise Pissarro saw? It has been difficult to judge, since only sixty-five canvases have survived and those are widely dispersed. Bazille turns up in art-history courses as a conspicuously tall presence in group portraits such as Fantin-Latour's *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870), where he stands behind the critic Astruc's chair, or his own *Studio on the rue La Condamine* of the same year (both Musée d'Orsay), where his lanky self-portrait dominates the center of the canvas, towering over his friends Monet, Manet, Renoir, and Zola. Most often, he is discussed briefly as a member of the Impressionists' inner circle, an intimate, supporter, and studio mate, who nonetheless does not figure in the development of Impressionism quite simply because he died before the first group exhibition in 1874. Every once in a while you come across an extremely convincing or, just as often, an extremely awkward painting by Bazille—for example, the stiff but sympathetic *African Woman with Peonies* (1870, National Gallery, Washington, D.C.) or the haunting *Family Gathering* (1867, Musée d'Orsay), where the Bazille clan's relaxed conversation appears to have been stopped dead by the demands of their painter relation. But until last year, when the Musée Fabre, Montpellier, organized a full-scale homage to Bazille in honor of the 150th anniversary of his birth, it was impossible to form a clear picture of what the ambitious young artist was able to accomplish in his all too short life. An abridged but still comprehensive version of this exhibition, recently on view in Brooklyn and soon to travel to Memphis, has happily extended this privilege to American audi-

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ences.[1] Yet in many ways, Bazille remains as elusive as before. He still appears more clearly as friend and sometime model for his better-known (and longer-lived) colleagues than he does as a painter.

Perhaps this is inevitable, since Bazille was anything but a formed artist at the time of his death. What we have is not so much a coherent body of work as tantalizing indications of talent, effort, and aspiration, without any real sense of consistency or all-stops-out risk-taking. Many of his surviving pictures are modest—especially the most successful among them. Bazille's legacy is a vivid record of a serious young man's struggle to find an individual voice and method at a time when possibilities were enlarging, yet there's a pervasive cautiousness or, at least, prudence in many of the works that have come down to us, rather than the driven self-assurance of—say—the penniless young Monet of those years, at work on his dazzling near-life-size images of women in white dresses and frock-coated men in light-dappled gardens. Then, too, even the best of Bazille's surviving works make us think, more often than not, about other painters, about the artists he admired, both among his contemporaries and in the recent past. Perhaps the strongest effect of the Bazille show, in fact, is to demonstrate once again how complex a period the 1860s really was, for painting. Like the exemplary exhibit "The Rise of Landscape Painting in France: Corot to Monet," seen in 1991-92, the Bazille show reminds us of how old and new approaches overlapped and coexisted, of how profoundly accepted nineteenth-century masters influenced younger painters whom history now sees as rebels and radicals. (It's not surprising that Kermit Champa, the organizer of "Corot to Monet," has written provocatively about Bazille.) Modernism was indeed evolving in those years, but almost in spite of itself, looking backward as much as forward.

Bazille's history perhaps explains the caution. Born into a comfortable, prominent Protestant family in Montpellier, eminently respectable but with a fondness for the arts, Bazille followed family tradition by going to Paris to complete his education. He was not, however, supposed to study art, but rather medicine, supported by his family. Medicine was soon relegated to second place and eventually abandoned, as Bazille enrolled in the studio of Charles Gleyre, on the advice of one of his relatives, the painter Eugène Castelnau. There, Bazille met the young painters who would become his companions and mentors: Monet, Renoir, and Sisley; he, in turn, posed for them, let them share his studio, and helped to support them with whatever he could spare from what he received from his parents. It would be reasonable to assume that the family objected to all this, but there seems to have been little opposition, an anomaly partly explained by the Bazille family's ties to the art world of the day. Alfred Bruyas, the collector who was Courbet's patron, was a neighbor and friend; Bazille cousins knew such figures as Manet, Cézanne, Baudelaire, Nadar, and Verlaine well enough to invite them to dinner, and still other family connections were close to Courbet. It's an absorbing story of intricate relationships and cross-connections. Part of the (slightly over-designed) exhibition catalogue's strength lies in a series of essays by a variety of scholars that provide a context for Bazille's work, much of it based on information painstakingly gleaned from his surviving correspondence with his family and his painter friends. These highly descriptive letters make Bazille more real and immediate, and, at the same time, they help us to see his

1 "Frédéric Bazille et ses amis impressionnistes" was on view at the Pavillion du Musée Fabre, Montpellier, from July 9 through October 4, 1992. The American version of the show, "Frédéric Bazille: Prophet of Impressionism," was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from November 13, 1992, through January 24, 1993, and will travel to the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis (February 14 through April 25, 1993). A catalogue, with essays by Jean-Patrice Marandel, Dianne W. Pitman, François Daulte, and others, has been published by the Brooklyn Museum (176 pages, $22 paper).

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work. Knowing who the painter's most frequent companions were confirms influences suggested by the evidence of the paintings. Knowing that he said "tu" to Renoir, while adhering to the formal "vous" with Monet, for example, helps to explain some of the fluctuations in Bazille's approach.

And there are considerable fluctuations. Often, like so many young painters, Bazille is at his best when leaning on his chosen ancestors. The more his landscapes remind us of Courbet's, with their intense colors of grass, foliage, and sky, the better, although Corot's example is not to be discounted. The clear geometry and radiant light of the "Italian" Corot is palpable (and helpful) in the piled-up architecture in the backgrounds of Bazille's two large canvases of women seated out of doors, *The Pink Dress* (1864, Musée d'Orsay) and *View of the Village* (1868, Musée Fabre). Corot is present, too, in the moist light and broad handling of the landscapes of Aigues-Mortes and its ramparts, of 1867. The seated women themselves, like the solidly painted *Young Woman with Lowered Eyes* (1867, Private Collection), are reminiscent of Corot's middle-period figures, in both their rounded forms and their still, self-contained poses.

Delacroix, Bazille said, was his greatest hero, although his influence is less immediately visible. Bazille's painting of a corner of his sparsely furnished studio on Rue de Furstenberg, stove glowing red, canvases on the walls (1865, Musée Fabre), has been seen as an homage to Delacroix, who lived in the same building and painted a similar studio view, but once again, Corot's geometric near-monochrome studio interiors also provide a precedent.

Of Bazille's contemporaries, Fantin-Latour makes his presence felt in the flower paintings, as well as in the Musée Fabre's subtle second version of *African Woman with Peonies* (1870), where the sensitively rendered, luminous dark face and elegant hands of the woman arranging flowers are played against the lush pinks and creamy whites of the full-blown blossoms. Manet's beneficial influence (much disliked by the critics of the period) makes itself felt in a still life of glittering fish, and in two small, splendid oil sketches, one of soup-bowl covers and the other of two herrings, as well as in a couple of pictures of dead game birds, marvelous orchestrations of blacks, whites, and grays, applied with a vigorous touch. Yet the breadth of handling in these pictures probably owes something, too, to the proximity of Monet, who was obsessed in these years with capturing the way brilliant light obscures details and clarifies form; a pair of plein-air studies of vineyards, painted by Bazille near Montpellier, are informed by this sensibility.

The painting where Bazille comes closest to Monet, at least in intention, is the large *Family Gathering*, with its hoop-skirted women and elegant men grouped in the light-filled shade of a terrace; one regrets that it is not a part of the American version of the show. In the Musée d'Orsay, it's always enlightening to go from this picture to Monet's exactly contemporary *Women in the Garden*, where white flowers form a staccato counterpoint to pale, spreading skirts and floating ribbons, all shimmering against deep green, light-swallowing foliage. Everything seems precarious in the Monet, momentarily glimpsed by an unobserved spectator; the women, unaware that they are being watched, will move out of our range of vision, a breeze will shift the leaves and scatter the petals of the roses. Monet's rapid, loaded brush keeps pace with the implied transience of his subject. Bazille's painting is oddly static and self-conscious. Ten out of the eleven full-length figures—the artist's family and that of his aunt and uncle, plus a self-portrait—confront the viewer, some, like Bazille's cousin, who looks over her shoulder, with a certain amount of effort. The light is diffuse, with none of the brilliant, outdoor contrast of Monet's picture. *Family Gathering* is like a snapshot in which everyone is asked to turn and face the camera. In its rigidity it seems an example of a much older, less immediate tradition of figure painting, yet at the same time it is reminiscent of Courbet's solemn figure groups, those stiffly

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posed men and women apparently trapped in his dense brush strokes.

What, then, of Renoir? His closeness to Bazille is manifest in the softened modeling and more delicate touch of one of the lapsed medical student's most ambitious (and most conservative) compositions, *La Toilette* (1870, Musée Fabre). Neither Manet's nor Monet's attachment to scenes of modern life nor their forthright attack have had any influence on this Oriental fantasy. A set-piece evidently aimed at the Salon, *La Toilette* plays a creamy-skinned nude, invitingly relaxed on a fur-covered couch, against the gleaming back of a black woman stripped to the waist, a fully dressed woman who looks on appreciatively, and an assortment of Persian rugs, Chinese silks, and African stripes. (Despite the familiarity of the Orientalizing subject, the precedent provided by Delacroix, and the conventionality of the handling, the Salon rejected the offering.) It is a less than inspiring painting—far less seductive than the brushy little picture of the two golden herrings floating in a sea of dense paint, silly as that may sound—but it is an immeasurable improvement over Bazille's other large female nude, painted in 1864 (Musée Fabre). There, a life-size reclining figure, foreshortened to accommodate the demands of academic standards, sprawls across the bottom of the canvas on a patterned carpet, the difficult juncture of abdomen and hip decorously covered by a length of vaguely Japanese fabric. This early effort is distinguished by its general ineptness of drawing and dry laboriousness of paint application. Whatever you think of *La Toilette*, it must be admitted that Bazille had made great progress in six years.

He seems, however, to have been better at the male nude than the female, so much so that Champa has even suggested that Bazille had homosexual tendencies that reveal themselves in the relationships of his male protagonists. Whatever the artist's preferences, it's clear that *Fisherman with a Net* (1868, Rau Foundation for the Third World, Zurich), with its heroic male nude, improbably about to cast his net into a lily pond, is a far less predictable picture than *La Toilette*, although less accomplished in traditional terms. The fisherman, whose buttocks would be noticed on the training floor of any health club, is convincingly and easily rendered, as is the sun-patterned riverbank; it's just that he appears to have been pasted onto the outdoor scene.

The same is true of the near-surreal *Summer Scene (Bathers)* (1868, Harvard University Art Museums). A group of young men, at least four of them clearly posed by the same mop-haired model, occupy a sun-struck glade and a shady riverbank. Their postures range from casually observed attitudes of swimming, climbing out of the water, wrestling, and undressing to quotations from Renaissance martyrdoms and Classical river-gods. The young men are oddly dislocated, disconnected from one another; only the climbing figure in striped trunks and the half-clad bearded man who pulls him up the bank exchange glances. Yet while the men seem detached from their fellows and from the landscape, the cumulative effect of the large and small studio figures disposed around the patch of sunlit grass is to define the ample space of the setting and fill the picture with air. It's a peculiar painting, not the least because it seems to be striving for fairly academic verisimilitude, complete with a bolstering of historical convention, even though the subject appears to be a response to the Impressionists' (or even proto-Impressionists') desire to paint modern life. *Summer Scene* was accepted and received favorably in the Salon of 1870. (The catalogue's essay on perceptions of the painter, "Bazille and the Art Criticism of His Time," is extremely informative.)

The unanswerable question provoked by this exhibition remains, of course, what kind of painter would Bazille have been had he lived? Would he have participated fully in the admittedly rather wide-ranging movement we loosely call Impressionism? How good was he really? It is impossible to tell. Certainly he painted a few good pictures in those brief eight years, but no great pictures. Per-

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haps that is asking too much. Yet even when you compare Bazille to other notable painters dead at painfully young ages, the issue remains clouded. Unlike Masaccio, who died at twenty-seven, in 1428, Bazille did not radically alter our notion of what painting could be. Unlike Seurat, who died at thirty-one, in 1891, Bazille left no sheafs of extraordinary drawings, no brooding images that transform our standards of draftsmanship, nor did he formulate a theory of technique. But where could Seurat have gone with his meticulous, obsessive method? There is evidence in the work he managed to produce in his short career that he had become so adept at "applying his method" that his pictures risked becoming technical *tours de force*, mannered demonstrations of a system and little else. Géricault, dead at thirty-three, left proof of more raw talent and more penetration of feeling than Bazille's work suggests, to say nothing of greater inventiveness in putting a picture together, but Géricault lived four years longer and we've seen what strides Bazille made between 1864 and 1870. Another four years might have made a considerable difference.

I admit that the apparently increasing naturalism, the suppression of painterliness, in Bazille's "late" works is troubling, since it appears to be at odds with Modernist aspirations. (Is Renoir's innate conservatism to blame here?) Bazille's paintings of 1870 make the exhibition's subtitle, "Prophet of Impressionism," seem utterly beside the point. Still, it is useful to remember that if Matisse had died at Bazille's age, we would have no inkling of what he would become. Had Matisse not lived past his twenty-ninth birthday, we would have a few early still lifes of books, some copies of works in the Louvre, some vaguely expressionist landscapes, a few interiors and still lifes that suggest a burgeoning awareness of Impressionism and Cézanne, and a few tentative plein-air paintings made in Corsica whose rather sour, overheated color barely hints at what was to come. The prescient monochromatic view of Moreau's studio, with its standing, faceless model juxtaposed against a classical statue, would not be prescient at all, since the great figure compositions of 1907-9 would not exist. Bazille and Matisse started painting at about the same age—around twenty. If Matisse had not had his long, productive life as a painter, his most ambitious picture would be that large, thickly painted interior of a maid putting a flower vase on a table covered with elegant plates, gleaming silver, and crystal—the one that is all creamy whites, pale rose, and half tones. Makes you think, doesn't it?

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Metropolitan life: the novels of Dawn Powell

by Lauren Weiner

James Wolcott's optimistic pronouncement three years ago that "the Dawn Powell boom is about to be heard again" has been followed by silence. According to Wolcott, Powell, the bard of midcentury Greenwich Village, was supposed to be the literary comeback story of the 1990s. Why the re-publication of several of her novels has failed to create a lasting commotion is a question that is worth pondering.

Here was a writer who could lampoon the bourgeoisie as well as Sinclair Lewis did, and she avoided Lewis's satirical overkill. She conjured a world of East Coast socialites as engaging as that of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and she avoided Fitzgerald's self-indulgent and hackneyed romantic situations. Her work brimmed with intelligence, honesty, and humor. True, it often broke down on the technical side. But then the malformed plot or the tiresome reappearance of the same personality under different names in many of a novelist's works—these are faults that can be found aplenty in such canonized writers as, say, Ernest Hemingway. What Dawn Powell lacked that these other American authors had was affection for her characters. But we get ahead of ourselves. For this interesting but flawed novelist has so much to offer in the way of entertainment that we must set aside, for the moment, her corrosive cynicism about human nature to look at the inimitable New York world she created.

Powell's great gifts as a comic novelist save her from an empty sophistication. Mimicking the social rhythms of the bars, business meetings, and dinner parties of postwar Manhattan, she maneuvers her characters into multiple relationships of a Rube Goldberg complexity. A Powell plot typically comes to a head when the author contrives to pull one lever—usually it is at a social gathering of some kind—so that we may watch the elaborate structure hilariously collapse. Few novelists have reproduced with such witty accuracy the precise moment when drunken recriminations break out and spoil the party, or when a couple of chic career women simultaneously realize that their friendship has depended upon a mutual willingness to pretend to care about what the other has to say.

The mortar holding Powell's novelistic edifices together is equal parts alcohol and ambition, and the ambition is usually of the thwarted variety. For her "battered bon vivants," as she calls them, excuses for failure flow during the cocktail hour along with the gin.

The Powellian map extends from Greenwich Village eastward to Washington Square and the area around New York University, with occasional forays into downtown, the Bowery, and the swanky apartments of uptown. Her characters are the worker bees of New York's commercial-cultural hive: graphic artists, book illustrators, department-store managers with literary connections, newspapermen-turned-admen, intellectuals who pay the rent by editing the home-improve-

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ments section or the real-estate section of a glossy magazine. All of these people rub elbows with the bigshots of the Manhattan scene, the "success clique," as one of Powell's protagonists calls it.

The encounter between the famous and the nobodies is common in satirical writing; it is a situation that is easy to play for laughs. Powell does more, illuminating for us what we might call the conundrum of meritocracy and worldly success. It goes something like this: The aspiring artist is no fool; he knows that success will assuredly ruin his integrity and ultimately his work. Still he craves the laurels. Why? Because it rankles him to see them hogged by people less talented than he. How did these hogs get to be where they are? By engaging in the kind of ruthless and obsequious behavior that ruined whatever talent and integrity *they* began with . . . And around and around it goes.

Powell was born in Mount Gilead, Ohio, in 1897. She grew up in small towns in the area, and headed east as soon as she could do so, in 1918. She arrived in New York as a member of the naval reserve but apparently the end of the Great War freed her from the navy before her service had really begun. Ensconced in what she was proud to consider the artsy unconventionality of Greenwich Village, she began publishing, in 1928, a series of novels about inhabitants of Ohio villages who dream of the big time but rarely get there.

Her Winesburgs (they have names like Lamptown, Dell River, and Birchfield) are generally as grim as Sherwood Anderson's but nowhere near as believable or affecting. There are occasional flashes of brilliance in these works; but it is not until Powell's people make the escape that she herself did that her storytelling rises above melodrama and the fun is allowed to begin.

Five of her New York novels were recently reissued, and of these *The Locusts Have No King* and *A Time to Be Born* seem to me her best.[1]

The Locusts Have No King (1948) is about what happens when unremunerated talent presses its nose against the glass door of success and, lo and behold, the door swings open. Frederick Olliver is a threadbare and largely unnoticed historian who disdains the high-society life enjoyed by his lover, a rich, famous, and unhappily married playwright named Lyle Gaynor.

Frederick and Lyle are something rare in Powell's fiction: a compellingly rendered love match of two sympathetic characters. All is not well between them, of course, otherwise there would be no plot. While a series of artificially prolonged misunderstandings keeps Frederick and Lyle apart, Powell takes the reader on a tour of the postwar literary crowd.

It is full of fakes like Tyson Bricker, "New York's most publicized cultural leader." Bricker made his name by writing introductions to the works of Jane Austen without ever producing his promised definitive study of her. Volumes of "Bricker's Austen" fill the card catalogue of the New York Public Library "though he had not read her for twenty years and if he ever should do so again would be astonished at what he did not know about her, and at the number of sagacious things she had never said."

Though an Austen fan, Bricker is no milksop. He is one of Powell's sexual barracudas. They come in both male and female varieties, and they get more dangerous with age:

> Tyson was fifty-two and had been spoiled by the war into believing that young girls really adored him. It still baffled him that the sweet kids who used to rhumba . . . with him at the Stork Club now called him up only to get jobs for their returning soldiers. It made him throw his weight very vigorously on the side of bigger armies and more wars.

Frederick Olliver so despises the self-promoting ways of the Bricker types that he even sabotages his own opportunities to get ahead (he is, at bottom, afraid that he deserves to be a failure). Ironically, the tasteless

1 Both *The Locusts Have No King* (286 pages) and *A Time to Be Born* (334 pages) are available in paperback from Yarrow Press ($9.95 each).

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Bricker becomes impressed with the hack work Frederick is doing simply to keep body and soul together. On his own initiative Bricker sees to it that Frederick's *magnum opus* is published, and its fabulous success turns Frederick into an intellectual star just as Lyle Gaynor's Broadway career begins to falter. Powell gets some good mileage out of the couple's see-sawing fortunes and she manipulates well a juicy cast of bit players; however, a melodramatic existentialist element finds its way into the novel and hobbles what would have been a first-rate screwball comedy.

The book's strangely overreaching title and epigraph are emblematic of the problem. They come from Proverbs: "The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands." As a self-made New York sophisticate, Powell is hardly endorsing at face value this biblical teaching about the divine inspiration that moves creatures to organize themselves spontaneously. The suggestion is, rather, the opposite—Powell has caught the profundity bug and appears to be making a God-is-dead sort of statement about man's search for meaning in an irrational universe.

The novel's botched ending bears this interpretation out. The not-unsatisfying reunion of Lyle and Frederick should have ended after the kiss. Instead, the reunion is given tragic overtones. There are ominous news reports of the testing of the atom bomb off the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. As the radio announcer intones blackly over Lyle's RCA Victor, Frederick, "filled with fear, . . . went over to Lyle and held her tightly. In a world of destruction one must hold fast to whatever fragments of love are left, for sometimes a mosaic can be more beautiful than an unbroken pattern." End of novel. The playwright John Guare, who wrote the introduction to the new edition of *The Locusts Have No King*, pronounces this finale "a declaration of ironic wisdom and passionate insight" that is "magically devoid of any sentimentality." Gore Vidal—although it was he who instigated the Dawn Powell revival—could nonetheless find his way to a more astringent verdict, one that hits nearer the mark: "We all tended to write this sort of thing immediately after Hiroshima, *mon assassin*."

Moments like that are blessedly rare in Powell's fiction. The carnival atmosphere of her comedies is usually punctured not by Overwhelming Forces but by the human imperfections, large and small, that have kept satirists in business since the days of Petronius. It was, in fact, the Roman author's *Satyricon* that Powell is said to have taken as an inspiration for her work. She is indeed expert at creating her own "Dinners with Trimalchio" where, just as in the original, rich men and women have license to bellow ignorant things (they are, after all, footing the bill) while the smarter nonentities at the table can only quip into their napkins.

Interestingly, Powell's catalogue of human defects seldom involves deliberate misconduct. While everyone is racing for the laurels in these books, what we would expect in the way of tripping a fellow competitor almost never happens. People seldom intentionally do each other bad turns. When a rarity such as blackmail occurs, there is usually something whimsically G-rated about it. Even a rat like Tyson Bricker can turn out to be the angel of a deserving person's success. This quality of madcap arbitrariness was aptly characterized by Edmund Wilson—in the only piece he ever published about his friend Dawn Powell—as a "fairyland strain of Welsh fantasy" that "instils into everything she writes a kind of kaleidoscopic liveliness that renders even her hardheadedness elusive."

Regarding the battle of the sexes, one of Powell's great themes, the picture is somewhat different. The sexual arena, as Powell portrays it, is much, much crueller than the fame derby. There is the Man's Problem, which would later come to be referred to as "fear of intimacy." Then, naturally, there is the Woman's Problem, which is other women. A woman's own steadfast affection is a given, but so is the fact that men are tomcats and hence prey to all the competition that is out there. As one of Powell's am-

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bivalent career girls wryly concludes, fidelity cannot be demanded of men: "You can't do that when you're trying to show how much more understanding you are than the other woman. . . . It's no wonder a man takes advantage of it."

The women of her 1942 novel *A Time to Be Born*, two escapees from Lakeville, Ohio, set their caps for the same Manhattan man. Amanda Keeler Evans and Vicky Haven form a sort of matching set of Midwestern pilgrims: one is naughty and the other nice. Amanda has bluffed her way into becoming a certified bigshot and she invites her mild-mannered hometown friend, Vicky, to follow her to New York and be her protégée. A distinctly Frederick Olliverish, down-on-his-luck writer becomes the bone of contention between them.

A Time to Be Born offers (besides another of Powell's ghastly choices of title) a number of charms. Chief among them is the Elroy family, one of the funniest upperclass WASP families in American fiction. The Elroys are right out of *The Philadelphia Story*—not ice-cold Calvinists who keep their conflicts carefully bottled up but talky plutocrats who squabble publicly, giving embarrassed newcomers an instant picture of who hates whom and why.

Vicky Haven is the latest innocent bystander to be drawn in. The Elroys only invite Vicky to their spacious Upper East Side apartment so they can pump her for gossip about her glittery friend Amanda, a fast-track journalist and author. The widow Elroy and two bickering Elroy daughters chat Vicky up while scholarly Uncle Rockman Elroy, a most reluctant head of household, distractedly hums snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan and gets sozzled on highballs.

"Tuffy" Elroy, an ugly-duckling debutante more sexually precocious than her older, prettier sister, informs Vicky that her sister is about to marry "the all-time low in the male animal. . . . If he can even braid a basket, I'll eat it." Upon hearing this remark

> Mrs. Elroy frowned sternly at her younger daughter. She had always considered it a pretty woman's right to be a fiend . . . but to balance this state of society it was up to the plain girls to rigorously uphold the banner of breeding and constant good nature. Unfortunately Tuffy had never seen eye to eye with her on this and had the audacity to have all the selfishness and ill-temper of a belle.

In the matter of who gets the guy (Ken Saunders, the Frederick Olliverish writer), we sense that—as should be the case in a comedy—nice is destined to defeat naughty. Vicky Haven amuses us most when we notice that, like all of Powell's morally superior female characters, she protects her own romantic interests with about as much ferocity as Antonio protects his wealth in *The Merchant of Venice*. But as a goody-goody Vicky is rather wooden, and her triumph does not absorb us much.

The downfall of Amanda Keeler Evans is, on the contrary, compelling. Amanda owes her illustrious career to her publishing-magnate husband and to her credo that "The tragedy of the attic poets, Keats, Shelley, Burns, was not that they died young but that they were obliged by poverty to do all their own writing." Powell will let us have no illusions: Amanda is not an innocent corrupted by the big city but one who arrived there guileful enough to ascend to the top. Justice arrives in due course. Among the misfortunes that befall Amanda is her abortion of a child fathered by Ken Saunders.

The abortion interlude is interesting. Vicky, as Amanda's only female friend, accompanies the latter through her ordeal. Vicky's depressing waiting-room narration is a suitably indirect way to handle a sordid incident in a light novel. Powell has here let the grim realities of life obtrude in a way that is totally credible. We are even moved to sympathy for Amanda, rascal though she is. One assumes it was fairly daring to give even a second-hand account of an event like this in a novel written in the early 1940s.

Feminists may adduce such items as proof that Powell is one of their own. Enhancing their case would be the male characters in these books. The ones who are not macho

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child-men tend to be either craven heterosexuals or repellent homosexuals.

And certainly the frequency with which wronged wives buckle under the unfairness of their situation suggests a view of marriage that is critical, even radically so. In *Angels on Toast* (the least accomplished of the five reissued books, first published in 1940), the miserable Mary Donovan wishes she could commit indiscretions to rival her husband's—if only she could persuade herself to like sex. Powell's way of curing a wife of her tortured virtue is to have her crack up and commit implausible acts of revenge against the husband and/or herself. This is what happens in *Angels on Toast* as well as at the climax of one of Powell's Ohio novels, *Dance Night* (1930), where the wife murders her philandering mate. In *A Time to Be Born*, the upper-class matron from whom Amanda Keeler Evans originally stole Mr. Evans is such a polite chump that she does not even permit herself to be angry at the theft. The effect of all that pent-up resentment is that the first Mrs. Evans is eventually dragged into a sanitarium wearing a straitjacket.

So marriage is presented as a boringly bourgeois institution that ruins women's lives. Why, Powell often has her characters wonder, can't a woman have a fling or two and keep her reputation? According to Edmund Wilson, Powell's writings were not best-seller material because her female characters were "as sordid and absurd as the men." It is true that they are not the diaphanous maidens to be found in, say, Herman Wouk or Edna Ferber, but "sordid and absurd" is too strong. The women simply go ahead and have a good time despite lacking the credentials to do so with impunity. Those credentials are well known to *Angels on Toast*'s heroine, a picaresque commercial artist named Ebie Vane. "A girl alone had to have an above reproach background in which to be Bohemian," Ebie says. The "gay visiting duchess" can cut loose in the Village bistros and her money will protect her from being thought "either a nut or a tramp. A good address was a girl's best mother in New York."

To fully answer the question of Powell and feminism one would have to grasp her rock-bottom opinion of women. And this is a most difficult thing to do, obsessive though Powell is about analyzing their behavior and their place in society. She gives mixed signals. Amanda Keeler Evans condemns her entire sex as vain and frivolous but we dismiss the condemnation as the product of Amanda's arrogance and hypocrisy. Yet at other times Powell, in her own right, blasts women for these same qualities. A third complication sends us back again the other way: Are not men the blackguards who are egging women on in their vanity and frivolity?

As Powell composes *A Time to Be Born* the United States is preparing to join the war against the Axis powers. Meanwhile on the homefront, she editorializes, feminine consumerism—risible in the quietest of times—takes on added ridiculousness against a patriotic background:

> The ominous smell of gunpowder was matched by a rising cloud of Schiaparelli's *Shocking*. The women were once more armed, and their happy voices sang of destruction to come. Off to the relief offices they rode . . . to knit, to sew, to take part in the charade, anything to help Lady Bertrand's cause; off they rode in the new car, the new mink, the new emerald bracelet, the new electrically treated complexion, presented by or extorted from the loving-hearted gentlemen who make both women and wars possible.

Peabody's magazine, the *Redbook*-type publication where Vicky Haven works, tries to cover the fall of Paris from the angle of fall fashions in Paris, and the magazine is picketed by women's groups for insulting the intelligence of its readership. Powell mocks the protesters for their huffy indignation.

In short, the satire is so multidirectional that it is just as appropriate to ask whether or not Powell is a misogynist as it is to ask whether or not she is a feminist. Of course the answer to both questions might be no. Unlike her contemporary, Mary McCarthy, Powell's critical view of her sex seems to have

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no personal meanness in it, just a mischievous detachment.

One senses in Powell not anger, exactly, but a kind of weariness about the relations between men and women. If men never take the least responsibility for their infidelities—if the wretches even blame their disloyalty on their virginal sweethearts, who deny them sex—the answer seems to be that good women simply have to adjust. This adjustment, in many cases, means a betrayed virgin becomes the mistress of the man who let her down. One such character says that she has "understood her part . . . It was enough that there *was* love, and the woman's duty was always to guard it, to have it ready when the man needed it."

One does not, finally, detect in Powell a desire that women gain equality with men. She seems to write, rather, out of a quixotic wish that men would wake up one day and love women, silly as they are, in the same measure that women surely do love men, bastards that *they* are.

In his lengthy tribute to Powell in *The New York Review of Books* in 1987, Gore Vidal described his friend's entire career, from her wild social life among the literati to her efforts as a playwright to her fifteen novels.[2] In the mid-1930s two of her plays made it to the stage. But according to Vidal it was failure in the theater that set her to writing novels. They were not notably successful in the United States, but their arch humor won them a dedicated, if small, following in England.

Powell was married and had a son who was born retarded. She wrote everything from press releases and advertising copy to feature articles in the newspapers to earn money for special tutors and nurses for her son. That she always remained the struggling artist seems partly to have been a matter of pride. Her "complete indifference to publicity" was noted by Wilson in his review of what was to be her last novel, *The Golden Spur* (1962). "She rarely . . . has publishers' parties given her," Wilson wrote. "She declines to play the great lady of letters." One hesitates to call this reverse snobbery, but, then again, there were comments such as that made to John Guare by Powell's literary executor, Jacqueline Miller Rice: "If people said she was another Dorothy Parker, she'd hit them. Dawn was a Village person. Not an Algonquin person, even though Benchley adored her."

Wilson makes Powell out to be aloof in more ways than one, indicating that she was not swept up in the political enthusiasms that took hold in New York intellectual life between the world wars. By the time the 1960s rolled around she was an old-timer who merely missed the bohemia of bygone years because it was so much fun.

Not that she was capable of getting weepy about the old days. *The Golden Spur* is a tender look back only in the subtlest of ways. The novel's premise rests upon another of Powell's nice but by no means prudish unmarried women. She is a contemporary, really, of the ingénues of Powell's Ohio novels. But since time has marched on, we only come to hear of her after she has married, led a full life, and died, leaving a son—winsome young Jonathan Jaimison of Silver City, Ohio—who has come to New York to find out who his real father is. During a long-ago sojourn in Manhattan, Jonathan's mother had dallied with several Prince Charmings. So many, in fact, that Jonathan has quite a long list of possible dads to hunt down.

The trouble with the book is that Jonathan is not very interesting, so it is difficult to care about his search for his paternity. It is a sign of Powell's resourcefulness that she could, for this final performance, beget Jonathan, so to speak, from the midcentury woman who had been at the center of her fiction. But it is a sign of her limitations, too, that she cannot make the young man convincingly

2 This essay, "Dawn Powell: The American Writer," is reprinted in Vidal's 1988 collection *At Home*. An abridged version serves as the Introduction to the paperback reissues of *Angels on Toast* (273 pages), *The Wicked Pavilion* (306 pages), and *The Golden Spur* (274 pages), all from Vintage Books ($8.95 each).

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alive, while his deceased mother does come to seem a real presence as her character is pieced together from the memories of those who knew her in her prime.

I hasten to add that Jonathan's candidates for fatherhood are marvelously drawn. There is the novelist Alvine Harshawe, a beleaguered celebrity who makes a drunken pilgrimage back to his old Village haunts, in one of which a literature fan who mistakes him for John Steinbeck tries to buy him a drink. The complications of life at the top have left Harshawe envious of his long-lost Village friends, who live simple lives because their careers never went anywhere.

Of course, the failures are not happy, either. NYU professor Walter Kellsey is a denizen of the down-at-the-heels Golden Spur bar near Bleecker Street, which Jonathan's mother used to patronize and which is therefore the base of operations for his Oedipal search. The bar has managed to survive the decades, its Western motif looking ever frowsier as it has evolved from "the writer's speakeasy" into a hangout for jazz musicians, then actors, and finally artists. The artists more than hold their own as imbibers of the Golden Spur's traditional rotgut. As Kellsey (a left-over writer) rather dyspeptically observes: "Painters have got to drink . . . A painter can't turn out the stuff they have to do now without being loaded."

Professor Kellsey would feel less a loser if Jonathan really did turn out to be his son. Kellsey is saddled with a wife and a mistress, and the latter especially irks him when she returns from psychoanalysis in a buoyant mood:

> The shrinker had certainly filled her up with self-confidence this time, Walter thought, and he wondered how long before it would start chipping off like the lipstick and eyeshadow. Whatever was making her so satisfied made him jealous, but then he was jealous of everybody nowadays, jealous of the President of the United States for all that free rent and gravy, jealous of cops for their freedom to sock anybody who annoyed them, jealous of students who could skip his classes, jealous of . . . anybody stupid enough to believe in his own genius.

Perhaps the most intriguing character in the book is Claire Van Orphen, a sixtyish author of feature articles and short stories whose writing career has long since faded but who (stupidly in her mind, but touchingly in ours) persists in "believing in her own genius," if only to stash her latest productions in the desk drawer. Claire once knew Jonathan's mother, and when the young man seeks her out, her career gets an unexpected lift. He introduces his Golden Spur acquaintances to one another, inadvertently hooking Claire up with a middle-aged beatnik editor who turns her unsold manuscripts into material that television producers are keen to use. Powell herself did some writing for television, according to Vidal. He does not say how successful she was at it, but it is easy to see Claire Van Orphen as a rescued Dawn Powell.

One thing that is visible from the span of her writings across more than three decades is that, as crazy as the 1960s were to become after she passed from the scene (she died of cancer in 1965), there may have been a new vehemence in the hippies' rejection of middle-class life but there was no new idea behind it. As Wilson points out, the scruffy beatniks and Abstract Expressionists we see cavorting in the Golden Spur bar display an abhorrence of "squares" that merely continues "the old Greenwich Villager's attitude toward the traditional artists' enemy: 'uptown.'"

Powell had been using the clash of commerce and culture all along, and while she makes clear that her allegiance is with the artists, she invites us to laugh at people on both sides of the divide. In *The Golden Spur*, as in *The Wicked Pavilion*, her two novels incorporating the explosion of modern art in postwar New York City, it is open season on beatniks and burghers alike. The ending of *The Golden Spur* constitutes a nod in favor of the new generation of rebels and their feverishly iconoclastic art (an outré, Pied

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Piper-like painter becomes Jonathan Jaimison's model for living). It is, however, a most equivocal nod. In her ambivalence Powell is a little like one of her characters in *The Wicked Pavilion*, whom she impishly dubbed a "rear avant-gardist." Such a person—"progressive," in a broad sense, but by no means leader of the pack—can respond to the shock of the new either by staying cheerful or by getting run over. Powell, characteristically, chose cheerfulness.

The rear avant-gardist in *The Wicked Pavilion* (1954) is Hoff Bemans, critic at large—"a fast man with the blurb for anything from pottery exhibits to the new jazz." He is one of a welter of characters in a veritable three-ring circus of a novel. *The Wicked Pavilion*'s dizzying plot defies summary. (The book's epigraph is from *The Creevey Papers*, in which weary courtiers party endlessly in a "wicked Pavilion" while awaiting the arrival of the Prince.) Its clutter is unfortunate because the novel provides some of the most complete answers to Powell's major questions: How should the artist use his talent? Who deserves fame? Can any good be salvaged from the wreckage of human relationships?

There is an artists' subplot, a lovers' subplot, and, for comic relief, a rich-WASP-family subplot. The unifying element is that everyone hangs out at an establishment called the Café Julien (good food, bad service), a wicked pavilion that is based on the café of the long-defunct Lafayette Hotel near Washington Square, where Powell was wont to hold her own kind of court with Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and others in attendance.

The artists' subplot offers middle-aged Dalzell Sloan, a broken-down painter from a "far western village" who is considering a final retreat to his home town if he cannot muster the energy to get out of the rut he is in. The presumed death of a friend—the painter Marius, who has dropped out of sight and whose paintings are now skyrocketing in value—provides a way for Dalzell to earn money and (at least indirectly) recognition. Shut out from the opportunity to show their works in Manhattan's galleries, Dalzell and another, similarly struggling old friend decide that they are going to commit a crime so they can continue to commit art: They will pass off their own paintings and drawings as those of the posthumously hotter-than-hot Marius.

The reader understands that money is at stake but so, too, is pride. Dalzell is called a "genius and a gentleman" by another character whose judgment we trust, while Marius is by all accounts a reprobate, so the forgery scheme has about it that harmless devilry so typical of the Powellian fairyland. Moreover, it provides one of the rare occasions in her fiction when people drop the social mask and admit their human need: once decided on their scheme, Dalzell and his partner "couldn't stop laughing. It was wonderful to have fear and loneliness transformed at last into a great joke between friends." Camaraderie among forgerers is camaraderie, anyway. Such moments are to be savored for their infrequency.

Disillusionment in the partnership follows. Crime does not pay and the mutual sympathy of friends inevitably wears thin. After it all falls through, Dalzell accepts what luck seems to have had in store for him since the novel's opening pages: he allows himself to be commissioned by the bourgeoisie to paint portraits. Dalzell is consigned, if not to hack work of the lowest order, then to the kind of work that will assure a well-fed anonymity. Powell is here saying that if the "commercial artist" has made a pact with the devil, so be it. At least he has not gone home in disgrace, to be swallowed up in "those great open spaces between Esso and Gulf," as Powell once termed Middle America. Leave fame to the opportunists who will always grab it; a "genius and a gentleman" should try to accept defeat gracefully.

Powell herself never accepted defeat so gracefully as to actually stop writing. According to Jacqueline Miller Rice, Powell refused surgery on her cancer and probably shortened her life thereby, but she kept on producing nearly to the end. As *The Golden Spur*'s Claire Van Orphen puts it: "You didn't run to win the prize as you did in youth.

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Indeed your dimming eyes could not tell if you'd passed the goal or not. You went on running because in the end that was the only prize there was—to be alive, to be in the race." If there are flaws in her work, at least she produced her work. She editorializes on this point on several occasions, most wittily when Claire Van Orphen's editor friend is moved to tell her of "his foolish perfectionism that made his stories too good to sell or for that matter even to write."

That Powell never got into the "success clique" is, perhaps, fortunate for her art; her position at the clique's fringes allowed her to be an able satirist of it. That there should be something elusive about her hardheadedness, as Wilson said, most certainly is fortunate for her art. If her cynicism were delivered straight, without the playfulness, it would entirely overwhelm the reader. Powell sees the bonds of love and friendship as too tenuous to trust and the bonds of family as too suffocating to submit to for long.

One can hardly expect a pessimist about human affairs to bestow much love upon the humans who populate her fiction. Yet that is precisely what is needed if they are to seem, well . . . human to us. Notwithstanding Sinclair Lewis's ad nauseam attacks on the institutions of George F. Babbitt's world, George F. himself lives and breathes because Lewis in fact loves him. (Babbitt's undeserved reputation for emptiness represents a fascinating conflation, in the years since 1922, of the character Lewis created with the milieu in which he placed his creation.) Powell's frequent failure to love—unsentimentally love—her characters renders too many of them brittle.

If she does not love people, she certainly loves the place: New York City. This is why her transplanted Midwesterners, come what may, end up feeling more resigned than bitter. If there were actual bitterness, why wouldn't one have moved back to where one came from? Powell's dislike of her origins —by 1947 she was telling friends that "New York is not the same city it was, being overrun now with Americans"—is another quality that sometimes hampers her artistically. Contempt can amuse but it can also make urbanity seem, finally, a cover for fidgetiness. Powell was so enamored of the life led by "the Midnight People, who drink and dance and rattle and are ever afraid to be silent" (Sinclair Lewis again), that we may be tempted to suspect her, too, of fearing silence—and the depths of introspection made possible by it.

None of this, however, makes one glad that no heap of rewards ever fell, all unbidden, upon the head of Dawn Powell. Hers was a uniquely droll and captivating fictional world. Her characters' very unwillingness to bow and scrape sometimes won them their professional or romantic hearts' desires. In real life, the novelist's own unwillingness to do so meant that the travails of Truman Capote's Holly Golightly, not those of Ebie Vane or Amanda Keeler Evans, made it into that minor-league pantheon of books-turned-into-major-motion-pictures. It meant that Mary McCarthy's out-of-print early fiction, and not Dawn Powell's, is today passed from reader to reader in frayed copies. For all of her limitations, Powell is a better literary artist than they. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* seems ingratiating and thin, and *The Group* soullessly sociological, next to Powell's best efforts and even next to her lesser ones. Capote and McCarthy each have a small place in the literary firmament; Dawn Powell has none. It is not an unfairness of Olympian proportions, but it is still unfair.

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Poems *by Sidney Wade, J. R. Solonche, Stephen Stepanchev, Richard Foerster & Floyd Skloot*

Serenade in faded green

The kitchen distills their self-esteem
as culinary ambitions whip up some dust

in the connubial air. Of the several
fantasias arranged by them on argent platters,

none seems so poignant as that which blooms
solo in the moonlight, an aromatic nocturne

crowned with stars. Nightly he expands in ardent pursuit
of the true harmonics of maritime soup,

leaving scant room for her, land-locked and full
of pride, to gather the petals

she needs for her salad, to exercise
her shapely designs on bitter foliage

and evening fruit. It doesn't seem to matter.
Under the everyday moon, their eyes

seldom lock. Nor do they follow the proper
receipts for a fine and fragrant marriage.

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Nevertheless, they noddle along, improvise,
ornament their inventions, they think, where they must.

There is no heaven here for him or her,
for anyone who simmers in the muted

light of delight diluted by small
but nightly disappointments. But one hopes

that doesn't matter either. For the moment
we will contemplate the many and musical

variations conceivable given an open mind or two,
a little room, and a very fine cabbage.

—*Sidney Wade*

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Over there

Although we know they may
not be better necessarily,
over there we know at least
things are different, and we

sense we would be different
ourselves all these years
had we been born, brought
up, nurtured over there,

been given opportunities
to play the barefoot games,
had we had the friends
with the perfect trochee names

who lived on streets with
no sharp corners but with trees
that grew, merged over roads,
melded light like arches,

in houses shadowed with
pianos and portraits in oil,
who went to the alabaster
school on the low, smooth hill

with a library on whose
shelves are only first editions
bound in leather and halls
echoing a bronze tradition

like a language stranger
than ours, older and stronger,
the language of flawless children
into which ours fades forever.

—J. R. Solonche

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A look at the moon

Reflecting a foreign, far-off fire,
The moon, I imagine, hungers for young men
As she lingers palely on the fire escape,
Feeling a fever she can't escape.

Does she, like Eos, swoop down for her man
And carry him off to an airless lunar cave
For blood transfusions? Can she speak to him
Without sound waves? Do her vine-like hands
Amuse him with their insincerity?

Her thin moonlight barely casts a shade.
She pulls a little, and the suicide rate goes up.

I see a skull bombarded by meteors,
Pockmarked by celestial smallpox, scars
To read and misread. The morning blunders in.

She shuffles off furtively, the air burns blue,
And the volcano on the horizon erupts with news.

—*Stephen Stepanchev*

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Canto XIII

Seven years, seven circles, I've watched the maples
in their swampy ground behind my house,
limb by limb, grow bare of leaves

and yet not die: as if to prove
some inverse law of diminishment,
they flower and fruit and spin

into the wind a locust-swarm
of double-winged seeds, more prodigal
each June even as the higher boughs

resound beneath the flickers' hammering,
but today the trees are swaying, restive as mourners
locked inside a half-life of regret,

bleeding like Dante's grove of suicides—
where a poet snapping a branch can mistake
for pity the silence seeping through his bones.

—Richard Foerster

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Currents

The great blue heron rides a cottonwood
limb downriver. She spins through a circle
of sunlight as her mate's wide loops dazzle
the morning and his hoarse squawk says he would
join her if he could. He swoops close to see
again there is no room. She turns her long
neck slower than the limb turns in the strong
current, keeping him in sight as though she
imagines currents of air mimic dark
river currents she will dare when the time
comes. He moves like a dancer past his prime,
a beat slow for her and just off the mark,
but game while she waits against the measure
for a moment they can enter together.

—*Floyd Skloot*

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Music

Mitsuko Uchida at Carnegie Hall

by Samuel Lipman

One hears a great deal these days about the decline of the solo recital. To judge by newspaper coverage alone, not just in *The New York Times* but in other American newspapers, and not just by the American press but by the English as well, recitals come a distant third behind orchestra concerts and, especially, behind opera. Why this should be so is in at least two senses not clear: the monumental solo literature written for the piano and for the violin, and the *Lieder* and *chanson* literature written for the voice, lie at the heart of the repertory of the greatest music in the Western tradition. Furthermore, solo recitals, involving as they do just one artist, or an artist and an accompanist, are vastly cheaper to put onstage than large orchestras and opera companies. But in the case of the recital, clearly more is involved than art and money; in the postmodern entertainment world, even in the area of what once was enthusiastically hailed as high culture, hordes of performers and glittering spectacles are what the public seems to want.

But sometimes there does still exist a healthy market for the solo recital, as was proved by the sold-out state—including stage seats—of the recital the Japanese pianist Mitsuko Uchida gave at Carnegie Hall in the middle of December. Miss Uchida, born in 1948, studied from the age of twelve in Vienna, where her father was stationed as a diplomat. Her teacher, according to her program biography and a short entry in the new edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (1992), was Richard Hauser at the Vienna Academy of Music; according to an entry in Wilson Lyle's not always reliable *Dictionary of Pianists* (1984), she studied with the Polish artist Stefan Askenase and the famous German Beethoven specialist Wilhelm Kempff. It is remarkable, considering Miss Uchida's present stature, that she was never a first-prize winner in one of the famous international competitions, though she did win first prize in the 1969 Vienna Beethoven Competition. But of course concerts are much more important than contests: Miss Uchida now plays recitals in all the major musical cities of the world, and appears with many of the greatest orchestras in America and Europe.

Miss Uchida is noted for her performances and recordings of Mozart—she has recorded all the Mozart concertos, with Jeffrey Tate and the English Chamber Orchestra, for Philips. But for her Carnegie Hall recital, she chose to leave the protected enclave of Mozart—in any case an over-played and oversold enclave these past few years—and offer what might be called a meat-and-potatoes program: the Beethoven Sonata in E minor, opus 90, the Schumann *Carnaval*, the Webern Variations, opus 27, and the Schubert Sonata in G major, opus 78 (D.894).[1]

Her appearance was of particular interest because it offered proof that the solo piano

1 The Schubert sonata was incorrectly listed in the program as opus 79, rather than as opus 78.

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recital can still flourish with a large audience. It also provided a chance to assess the Western music-making of a highly respected Oriental artist. These days we hear a great deal about the presence of Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese—almost always pianists and string players, and usually women—in our best music schools; in some of these schools, the percentage of Asians in the piano and string departments would seem to approach half or even more of all the students enrolled. But almost all these students, when they continue in music after graduation at all, end up, if they are string players, in orchestras, and if they are pianists, as teachers, back at home if not in this country. On the level of famous performing personalities, Asians at this stage of their musical development still seem more consumers than producers: there are, to the best of my knowledge, no world-class Japanese orchestras; there is now one internationally famous Japanese orchestra conductor, Seiji Ozawa; one famous Korean violinist, Kyung-Wha Chung; one famous Taiwanese violinist, Cho-Liang Lin; one famous Chinese cellist, Yo-Yo Ma (though Ma was born in Paris and raised in America); one famous Japanese violinist, the erstwhile prodigy Midori; and, of course, the Japanese pianist Mitsuko Uchida herself. It should be mentioned, too, that some years ago the Japanese violinist Toshiya Eto made a distinguished international career. But regardless of the still small number of famous Asian performing artists, it remains clear that what happens to Western music in the Orient is a matter of the greatest importance not just for Asian societies but also for the future of Western music in the world as a whole.

In her Carnegie recital, Miss Uchida, thin and almost wraithlike, came out gracefully on stage past her applauding fans, bowed deeply from the waist, quickly sat down, fiddled for a split second with the knobs that adjust the height of the bench on which she was sitting, and while the audience was still applauding plunged into the opening *forte* chords of the two-movement Beethoven Sonata. The first movement is marked by Beethoven, in German, *Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck* ("With liveliness and throughout with sensitivity and expression"). In the Carnegie program listing, the first movement bore the shortened and not quite fully accurate Italian indication *Con vivacità ed espressione* ("With vivacity and expression"). One hesitates to make too much of a difference in the translation of a few words, but Beethoven's choice of language in his native German is hardly a trivial matter: *Empfindung* is a core word of German musical romanticism, as is *Ausdruck*. Together they conjure up a world of deep inner feeling of which the Italian word *espressione* only catches the most superficial aspect.

But indeed words—in the context of music—are only words, as critics always must be reminded. Unfortunately what was missing from Miss Uchida's performance on this occasion was any conveying of the tender and yet powerfully impassioned depths of Beethoven's music. In her haste to begin before either she or the audience was fully ready for the music, she produced an ugly piano tone, both thin and too loud; what should have been liveliness was haste, and what should have been tenderly affecting was merely sentimental and distorted. The giveaway, as it was to be all through the first half of the program, was the sound of the piano, an American Steinway. By turns forced and muffled, the sound lacked the commanding and golden presence of which fine Steinways, and the largest-scale artists, are capable. Instead, Miss Uchida's playing in dynamics and touch was here what might be called duo-chromatic; big and small, loud and soft, fast and slow, with little of nuance in between.

For example, in the glorious second movement of the Beethoven, the melody, instead of being maintained as a long lyrical line, was constantly interrupted by stops and rushes. The whole effect was arbitrary rather than decided, as if Beethoven's music were a kind of Rorschach test available for any kind of customized interpretation that might

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strike Miss Uchida's fancy. I suppose that the intention was to provide a new and individual look at Beethoven's familiar music. Sadly, what I heard instead was a kind of pious, dutiful Beethoven playing, more an effort than a pleasure.

Now it was time for Miss Uchida to play the Schumann *Carnaval*, that great test of the romantic pianist's mastery of his (or her!) *métier*. Here the problems for the performer are several: to conquer the numerous technical traps (which include rapid passage work and chords and a famous extended section in repeated notes), to differentiate between the work's many movements (each of them expressing a different facet of the personalities of Schumann and his friends), and to provide an overarching stylistic conception that binds together the music's disparate moods.[2]

As she had in the Beethoven, Miss Uchida rushed into the opening chords of the *Carnaval*, drawing a harsh tone from the instrument and in the process smashing more than a few notes. Once again her tempos were often rushed, depriving the fast passages of the melodic articulation which is one of the striking attributes of the piece. In the tender "Chopin," a loving evocation by Schumann of Chopin's songful style, the mood at the opening so faithfully mirrored the composer's indication of *Agitato* that the melody seemed quite lost amidst the welter of angry notes.[3] In "Reconnaissance," the repeated sixteenth notes, played by the thumb of the pianist's right hand, though clear, seemed to take over from, and cover, the serene melody in eighth notes an octave above. And finally, in the closing "Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins," Miss Uchida seemed again to lack the necessary power, substituting force for strength, and even then being unable to bring out clearly the quotation of "The Grandfather's Song," a folk tune played at formal balls to signal the attendees that it was time to go home. All in all, the performance failed to scale either the pianistic or romantic heights of this great music; the result was honorable, but little more.

Remarkably, after intermission, it seemed as if a different pianist had taken the stage. The Webern Variations, opus 27, were played with marvelous delicacy and a subtle feeling for the Viennese roots of the composer's Schoenberg-derived serialism. Because the Webern does not call for the kind of power which Miss Uchida does not seem to possess, the sound of the piano was lovely, and the tonal means were precisely calculated to achieve the music's expressive purpose.

Something of the same praise can be given to the Schubert with which Miss Uchida's program ended. The G-major Sonata—in the past usually called a Fantasy rather than a Sonata—is a work longer than it is large: that is, it is beautifully repetitious, using a rather small number of ideas presented in rather unvarying form. The amount of sound called for in this work is not large, with most of the musical material susceptible to refined and graceful treatment. In this formal sense, the Sonata is music for the living room rather than the concert hall; it shares with much other Schubert a gentle warmth that makes it ideal for a—dare I use the words?—gently feminine approach. But in fact by far the best part of Miss Uchida's playing is its femininity; this trait is both distinctive and highly admirable, and I have no doubt that it was responsible for the volleys of cheers that came from a standing audience at the end of the Schubert.

Furthermore, this point was only made again in the artist's two encores. The first was the tiny second piece of the 1913 *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, opus 19, of Arnold Schoen-

2 The historical—that is, the recorded—standards for performance of the *Carnaval* date from the late 1920s: they are Alfred Cortot's 1928 recording (now available on Biddulph CD LHW 004) and Sergei Rachmaninov's 1929 recording (now on Fidelio CD 8822).

3 Regarding the performance of this exquisite miniature, it is interesting to note that the English pianist Harold Bauer (1873-1951), widely beloved for his playing of Schumann, wrote about Schumann's marking: "The composer's indication 'agitato' is hardly appropriate for this romantic and sentimental page . . ."

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berg. Here, in Miss Uchida's performance, Schoenberg's dynamic indications, in which only one lonely and brief *mezzo-forte* and one *piano* competes with the prevailing level of *pianissimo*, were perfectly realized; as was true in her earlier Webern performance, the technical means of performance were perfectly attuned to the emotional content of the music. If Miss Uchida's Schoenberg was perfection, her second encore, the slow movement from Mozart's famous Sonata in C major, K.545, was rather less universal in conception but more personal: she played the entire movement in several finely graded shades of *piano* and *pianissimo*. The listener awaited each new turn of phrase in happy anticipation of the variety in miniature Miss Uchida would bring to her dynamic scheme.

A mixed verdict, then, but a hopeful one. The program Miss Uchida chose was representative enough of great piano music in general to convey accurately her strengths, as well as her limitations, at this stage of her career. However she may continue to develop musically, it is my guess that Miss Uchida simply is not somatically suited to the production of a heaven-storming volume of sound; piano tone is as much a function of the pianist's physical configuration as it is of a musical conception. It would be a pity, then, were she to force her remarkable talent in the direction of the largest and most grand *chefs d'oeuvre* of the romantic piano literature. It is clear from the successes in her Carnegie Hall recital that there is much marvelous music that she plays very wonderfully indeed. May she know her own virtues, and deploy them in the service of the beauty she undoubtedly can convey, and therefore create.

As to the wider question of the role of Asian musicians in Western music, I found myself, after Miss Uchida's concert, encouraged about the future. At a time when we ourselves are prone to discount our own achievements, it is comforting to realize that there are different societies in the world that, despite the differences between what might be called them and us, continue to honor, and contribute, to our high art. Such honor and contribution are the best refutation of all the absurd ideologies that today demand a stifling intellectual and cultural particularism.

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Art

Getting emotional

by Jed Perl

The best one-person shows that I saw in the fall were Lisa Zwerling's at the First Street Gallery and Joan Snyder's at Hirschl and Adler Modern. There was no single painting in Zwerling's show that had anything near the force or authority of some of the big symbolist abstractions in Snyder's show, but then again Zwerling's cycle of paintings, which illustrate fantastical encounters between people and animals, had an end-to-end coherence that was felicitous, provocative, unique.

Why were these the best shows I saw? Because the paintings had an emotional force that held me in the gallery. Zwerling's paintings, with their mix of tight realism and synthetic fantasy, are enigmatic in a way that I do not particularly care for. Yet Zwerling paints these enigmas so straightforwardly and resolutely, I find that I begin to believe in the reality of her dream-theater scenarios. Joan Snyder works with elements that might be said to be modernist clichés: simple symmetrical compositions, impastoed paint, found collage elements, and iconic imagery that includes schematic faces and cosmic circles. But Snyder defies the clichés. When she uses a piece of satin as a metaphor for gentleness, her pictorial sense is so assured, she makes us forget that the comparison has ever been made before. These two utterly different exhibitions prove a similar point, namely that the emotion in a painting doesn't depend on the conception or the realization, but on the tension between the two. Every artist negotiates between the ideal (what's glimpsed in the mind's eye) and the real (what's there on the canvas). The real and the ideal may ultimately be irreconcilable, but the artist's engagement in painting can, at least temporarily, make us believe otherwise.

Lisa Zwerling's paintings do not by any means avoid the pitfalls involved in mixing pictorial and literary and fantastical impulses. In most of the paintings that were in Zwerling's November show a nude woman contemplates an animal in a symbolist stand-off that suggests a meditation on the differences between nature and culture. Many of the paintings are long and narrow, with woman and animal set in a shallow, diorama-like space. There's something rather Art Nouveau or even Art Deco about this kind of symbolist theatricality; one might think of these paintings as a modern-day version of the work of Gustave Moreau or Fernand Khnopff (two artists I don't adore). It takes guts to give a show a title like this one had: "Primitive Mysteries." It also takes guts (or craziness) to do a painting in which a lady and a leopard are both reclining, both staring out at us. Zwerling goes about as far as it's possible to go with this weird stuff. She paints oceans, moons, storm clouds, darkness, nakedness. And why not? Where fantasy is the issue, half measures will not do.

This was a formula show, but its themes were not treated in a formulaic way. Each

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effect in the paintings is hard won, honestly won. The paintings are fairly small (many are ten by thirty-eight inches), and they have a close-worked power that comes from the controlled energy of the paint handling. Zwerling's brushwork is tightly focused yet big-scaled. This is a highly detailed kind of painting that nonetheless conveys, by means of small and even finicky brushstrokes, some of the rhapsodic force of painterly painting. The brushwork has a quality of controlled fervor. And the color underlines that impression. Overall, Zwerling's color is grayed-down in a way that unifies the tans of flesh, greens of foliage, reds of earth, blues of sky and sea. Yet she works strokes of intense color (often Delacroixesque reds and blues) into these darkish visions, so that the values rarely feel inert or dull. Everything in these paintings is carried by the honesty with which Zwerling handles paint. She doesn't fudge or obfuscate. She forthrightly confronts the considerable challenges involved in painting water, sky, foliage, animal fur, human flesh. If the subject matter has a theatrical air, the paint handling has its own, superior kind of drama. It's the drama of seeing how much one can realize, of seeing how far craft can carry one. The real nakedness in these paintings isn't the nakedness of flesh, it's the nakedness of the artist's hand, painting that flesh. Zwerling is a painter who dots every i and crosses every t. I respect her for that. She acknowledges the individuality of things. And because she won't fudge, she acknowledges the limits of her virtuosity. That's true virtuosity. Hands and feet are sometimes beyond her capacities. And her foliage sometimes looks naïve (though I wonder if this isn't a failed attempt to match the faux naïf of the foliage in Poussin's late work).

It's quite an achievement to paint a naked woman sitting in a moonlit landscape holding a bird and not have the whole thing strike us as ridiculous. If it weren't for the beautiful clarity of the paint handling, Zwerling would never get away with these murky narratives. But it takes more than deft painting to put narratives like this over. There's a concentrated intensity about Zwerling's relationship with her subject matter. Zwerling isn't just one more latter-day neoclassicist mooning over some pastoral world of boys and girls and pipes and goats that never was and never will be. Her strange narratives have a piquancy and peculiarity that feels modern. We know the people in these paintings: they have the slim, agile bodies that are the contemporary ideal. Dressed, these women and men might be walking along the city street. Undressed, they are actors in the artist's fantasy world. Figures that fail to mesh with their setting are so common a problem in contemporary figure composition that we can forget that there is a long, honorable tradition of placing contemporary figures in fantastic or at least noncontemporary settings. The young man in Titian's pastoral *Three Ages of Man*, for example, is a fashionable youth of the artist's period, and we enjoy that—it gives the painting an added richness. Zwerling's figures are contentedly self-conscious about their unclothed state, and this gives a particular edge to the way that they gaze at birds and beasts, who are contentedly un-self-conscious. The paintings are unconventionally erotic, never more so than when Zwerling introduces a man. She shows modern men in erotic poses—love-making poses—yet their partners are allegorical, bizarre. In *Daphne and Apollo* a man is astride a felled tree that is all that is left of Daphne; in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* a man lies on his back, embracing a dark bird with a human (female) face. These paintings are sheer craziness—symbolist howlers—yet Zwerling brings it all off so cleanly and clearly, I find that I'm at least to some degree a believer.

Zwerling paints brooding women and, in *Daphne and Apollo* and *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, elusive, disappearing women. The only contemporary work I can think of that these paintings even remotely resemble is Paul Georges's series of Diana and Actaeon paintings, in which the action centers around an elusive woman and a disappearing man. Zwerling's and Georges's work is related by the unabashed libidinousness of the use that

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the artists are making of classic subject matter. Both artists use the technique that comes naturally to a realist painter, and the increasingly personal nature of their work is part of an evolution that has taken place among many realist painters since the 1970s. There was a time when realist painting was thought an appropriate way to express generally held ideas—ideas about what the world looks like, ideas about history or literature. Yet a coherent realist movement in art proved to be a phantasm, and those realists who have managed to work fruitfully since the Seventies have had to accept the fragmented, personalized nature of any view of the world. Zwerling and Georges turn public myth into private myth. So far as myth-making is concerned, this is all that a painter can any longer do.

Joan Snyder is a painter of personal histories, but she is too much of a modernist to believe in the efficacy of myth. Snyder's work is immediate and visceral. She is an archetypal modernist, immersed in the task of realizing herself in the present, so that the history that her work relates turns out to be diaristic, a history of intense confrontations with the canvas. Snyder is an amazing painter. She creates visual rhythms so strong they hold even in memory. Who else today works a surface that is so full of shifting moods? I'm writing this some three months after her October show and I can still feel the pull of those paintings. This is not a recollection of bits and pieces, but of elements orchestrated into wholes that are plangent, with syncopated, throbbing rhythms. Nobody else uses mauves and grays to such sensuous effect. Nobody else can pull bits of satin and burlap, rusted metal, pieces of straw together into wholes that are so much more than the sums of their parts.

When going to a Snyder show it helps to have seen other Snyder shows. Her paintings are not unlike pages torn from a journal, and as with any journal it is only when one is familiar with all the pieces that the large themes begin to reveal themselves. In the past decade many of Snyder's strongest works have been based on the motif of a field—a field tilled or untilled, full of snow or growing things, muddy spring brown or brilliant summer green or autumn gold. There was one lovely field painting in this show—*Wintersong*, a snow-covered field. But the main motif in this show was the circle. This was not the circle viewed as an astronomical phenomenon, as it is in, say, the paintings of Pat Adams. Snyder is still holding to the earthy metaphors of the field paintings, and her circles give the sense of concavities, of a process of delving into something, of digging deep down. If there is a geological metaphor, it could be that of a journey to the center of the earth. At times the paintings evoke the scarred, lacerated surfaces of postwar European abstractionists such as Burri and Fontana; but unlike the work of those artists, Snyder's abstractions have strong metaphorical overtones (which are frequently made overt through her titles). The circles and the centered compositions suggest that these paintings are in part about a rejection of the relativism of composition. In contrast with the this-versus-that of the field paintings, the circle paintings are just this-this-this. In *The Changing Nature of Grief*, a horizontal work made of three panels, there is an evolution of circles, from circular heads to unadorned circles. The painting is about change—a movement across the canvas during which the circles change size and color. But the painting is also about stasis—the circle, which is grief, is essentially always the same. In Snyder's new work the circle is an essence. This is made clear in *Satin Core Metaphor (Dedicated to Maggie)*, where the satin center becomes an abstract portrait—a metaphor for love, gentleness, intimacy. It is in the nature of Snyder's kind of expressionist painting that the more fulfilled it is, the less there is to say about it. The circle is the heart of the matter.

The full-out emotion of Snyder's work is compelling and risky, the risk having to do with the assertion of so much emotion. True, grief and passion have become familiar subjects in the art galleries in this age of AIDS. But the overwhelming presence of contem-

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porary tragedy has as often as not made artists skeptical about the aestheticization of feeling that is involved in creating any authentic work of art. Snyder may be finding pictorial metaphors for primal experiences, but her new work arrives in SoHo at a time when many artists have little or no patience with pictorial experience. The passionateness of Snyder's work has long been identified as feminist. The irony for her right now is that a new generation of art-world feminists has rejected emotion and may be inclined to find Snyder's work retrograde and sentimental. In the Eighties, feminist art theorists abandoned feeling in favor of what was thought of as analysis—primarily this turned out to consist of an assertion of the maleness of modernism. The result was a suggestion that any woman who was totally committed to painting was somehow committed to a masculine view of art and life. In the SoHo context Joan Snyder's impassioned paintings look oddly old-fashioned. Joan Snyder is an old-style feminist: she believes that herstory is an extension and enrichment of history. That this old-style feminist is a militant modernist is not a fact that the postmodernists really want to deal with. But seeing is believing. Joan Snyder has tapped into the emotional core of modern art.

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Books

Catullus: the poet as lover & scourge

by Donald Lyons

An octogenarian, a man who has read Latin for pleasure all his life, recently remarked to me that, of all the Roman poets, Catullus was the one who actually seemed like a human being. I knew what he meant. Gaius Catullus was born in 84 B.C. to a provincial aristocrat in Verona, in the province of Cisalpine Gaul. His father had a villa on Lake Garda, where he entertained Julius Caesar. Later in Rome, Caesar, lampooned by Catullus in stinging epigrams (including one that ran: "I've no interest, Caesar, in currying favor with you, or indeed in learning whether you're a white or a black"), huffily demanded an apology; Catullus obliged; Caesar said, "Come to dinner"; Catullus did. In Rome, Catullus had joined ranks with other young highborn poets like Calvus and Cinna in a loose conspiracy to reform pompous, heavy, elephantine Roman poetry by injections of Alexandrian wit, erudition, and concision. Catullus retained from old Roman poetry, however, a habit of personal vituperation, obscene and rank, that he was to deploy in a variety of registers from angry to playful. In the city, Catullus conceived a passion for the patrician Clodia, faithless wife and, after 59, faithless widow of the magnifico Metellus Celer, governor of Catullus's home province. In 57-56, Catullus and Cinna served as lieutenants on the staff of Memmius, governor of a province on the Black Sea. (This Memmius, vituperated by Catullus, was himself a poet and was the dedicatee of the greatest of Roman poems, the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius, of whose social standing we know nothing and who died about the same time as Catullus.) During this duty, Catullus visited the grave, near Troy, of his brother, who had died a while back on (perhaps) similar duty. Catullus died at Rome in his thirtieth year of unknown causes.

This brief, and incautiously dogmatic, biographical sketch is designed simply to illustrate the milieux Catullus was at home in. It was a world not totally unlike that of the Whig grandees of the eighteenth century; Catullus's swank was very much that of an impudent and un-Romanly frivolous puppy grandee. Roman men of letters had, until these chaotic and wild years of the dying Republic, often been slaves; even in the next generation, under the Empire, Horace was the son of a freedman, and both Virgil and Horace came from the bourgeoisie. Augustus liked his laureates common. The late Republic, a lurid interregnum between the stolid, rustic, family values of the old Republic and the megalopolitan decadence of the Empire, was the unique moment when a bird like Catullus, a suave Sidney with the sassy manners of a Marlowe, could flap his wings and fly. The venerable orator Cicero, savior and pillar of the Commonwealth, was an artistic fuddy-duddy with little time for Catullus's "neoteric" poetic school, but he *had* heaped obloquy on Clodia and her incestuous brother, Clodius. Catullus rewarded Cicero with this gem of ambiguity:

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Silver-tongued among the sons of Rome
the dead, the living & the yet unborn,
Catullus, least of poets, sends
Marcus Tullius his warmest thanks:

—as much the least of poets
as he a prince of lawyers.

Humble respects or a sarcastic hit at an old windbag?

Catullus's oeuvre consists of some 116 poems, arranged in three divisions: sixty short pieces in short meters (most notably, the eleven-syllable and the sapphic); four long poems (two marriage songs and two mythological epyllia); fifty some epigrams in elegiac couplets (taking poem 65 as prologue to 66, which is a translation from Callimachus, the Greek master, far more than Sappho, of Catullus). I follow here the ingenious arrangement proposed by Guy Lee in his World's Classics edition of the poems, although Charles Martin, in the last chapter of his new book on Catullus, suggests an equally intriguing patterning of the long central poems 61-68.[1] But in general the grouping by theme, the delicate echoes, the occasional brutal switch from tenderly mournful to hair-raisingly obscene—all point to Catullus as the arranger of his poetry. Who else? As Wilamowitz said long ago, with Prussian finality: "If there is anybody who can't see that, so much the worse for him." But such issues as the tessellated placing of the poems among themselves and, as Charles Martin attempts to prove in his penultimate chapter, the chiastic ABBA thematic structure of poem 64, the longish and frigid epyllion on Ariadne, are not, finally, of interest to any but scholars or poetic technicians. And they are inevitably subjective and prone to triviality, as in the recent "discovery" of an acrostic in a poem of Catullus. The engine may be beautifully isomorphic but where is the gas?

Catullus lives only in his lines, in his audacious blend of Roman gravity, Italian insult, and Greek irony. Three variously valuable translations of Catullus are currently in print: Peter Whigham's lively paraphrase, in the spirit of William Carlos Williams, was first published by Penguin in 1966; the lines quoted above are his. Charles Martin's rich and delightful marshaling of a Poundian toughness, married to a flexible and unegoistic respect for the sense of the original poet, was first printed by Abattoir Editions, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in 1979 and was reissued by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1990. Martin calls his version "a measured paraphrase . . . written in measures that try to imitate those in which he wrote." And a plain, donnish metaphrase by Guy Lee is in the World's Classics; it has the homely domestic virtue of fidelity, the plus of a facing Latin text, and the surplus of an attractive small format and Titian's Bacchus on the cover.

It is in the poems in elegiac couplets to his brother and to Clodia, whom he has, in homage to Sappho, called Lesbia, that Catullus finds a new language for love—but only by first finding a new way to love, a true *approfondissement* of sentiment that constitutes a revolution in human feeling and that, incidentally, gives the lie to C. S. Lewis when he says that "if we turn to ancient love-poetry proper, we shall be . . . disappointed. We shall find the poets loud in their praises of love, no doubt. . . . But this is no more to be taken seriously than the countless panegyrics both ancient and modern on the all-consoling virtues of the bottle. If Catullus and Propertius vary the strain with cries of rage and misery, this is not so much because they are romantics as because they are exhibitionists. In their anger or their suffering they care not who knows the pass to which love has brought them." But no one had brought together separated spheres of emotion before Catullus in poem 72:

I loved you then, not only as common men
their girl-friend

1 *Catullus*, by Charles Martin. Hermes Books. Yale University Press, 197 pages, $30; $11 paper.

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But as a father loves his sons and
sons-in-law. (Lee)

Martin has here:

I didn't regard you just as my mistress then:
I cherished you
as a father does his sons or his daughters'
husbands.

And Whigham:

I loved you then
not as men love their women
but as a father his children—his family.

None of the three seem to me to get the shock or power of:

Dilexi tum te non tantum ut vulgus amicam
sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos.

Perhaps the stuttering pause in Whigham's "his children—his family" comes closest to what Catullus is doing here: applying Roman words for male family affections to sexual love.

Poem 75 constructs a novel geometry of desperation:

Lesbia, my will has sunk to this through your
frailty
And so destroyed itself by its own kindness
That it could neither like you, even were you
perfect,
Nor cease to love you though you stopped
at nothing. (Lee)

Martin has:

To such a state have I been brought by your
mischief, my Lesbia,
and so completely ruined by my devotion,
that I couldn't think kindly of you if you did
the best only,
nor cease to love, even if you should do—
everything.

Martin's "mischief" is better than Lee's "frailty," but I like the simplicity of Lee's "kindness," and Lee's contrast of "like" and "love" hits off the point of the poem brilliantly. Whigham indulges in a coyly modernist parataxis that loses sight of Catullus:

Reason blinded by sin, Lesbia,
a mind drowned in its own devotion:
come clothed in your excellences—
I cannot think tenderly of you,
sink to what acts you dare—
I can never cut this love.

One is not far from Catullus the beatnik here.

The anguished poem 76 ends:

I do not ask now that she love me in return
Or, what's impossible, that she be chaste.
I pray for my own health, to be rid of this foul
sickness.
O Gods, grant me this for my true dealing.
(Lee)

Martin has:

Now I no longer ask that she love me as I love
her,
or—even less likely—that she give up the
others:
all that I ask for is health, an end to this foul
sickness!
O gods, grant me this in exchange for my
worship.

Martin's colloquial American cadences carry the day here easily, except for that "worship"; Lee's "true dealing" is both truer to the Roman social range implicit in "pietate" and better English. Whigham forgets the last line entirely and indulges in a New Age wail: ". . . as I once was whole, make me now whole again."

And there is, of course, the almost too familiar poem 85, "odi et amo": "I hate and love. Perhaps you're asking why I do that?/ I don't know, but I feel it happening, and am racked" (Lee). "I hate & love. And if you should ask how I can do both,/ I couldn't say; but I feel it, and it shivers me" (Martin, who changes "shivers" to "tortures" when

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he translates 85 in his critical study). Martin's is obviously the more powerful version; his "how" much more meaningful than Lee's "why." We know *why*; it is because of Lesbia's sadistic behavior. It is the "how" that is interesting. Catullus's word for his suffering, "excrucior," is perhaps best rendered by Whigham, who has "I'm torn in two." And it should be remembered that Catullus cannot only parse his own pathos; he can also dish it out, and revel in the rawest abuse of the wanton Lesbia:

> Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
> illa Lesbia quam Catullus unam
> plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
> nunc in quadriviis et angiportis
> glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.
>
> Lesbia, Caelius—yes, our darling,
> yes, *Lesbia*, the Lesbia Catullus
> once loved uniquely, more than any other!
> —now on streetcorners & in wretched alleys
> she shucks the offspring of greathearted Remus.
> (Poem 58, Martin)

But the happiest, fullest notes in Catullus are those celebrating his ability to make art out of the raw material of his life, just as he made "Lesbia" out of Clodia. His signature poem, to me, is not the love or love/hate lyrics but 50, about poets and poem-making. I quote Martin:

> Just yesterday, Licinius, at leisure,
> we played around for hours with my tablets
> writing erotic verse as we'd agreed to,
> each of us taking turns at improvising
> line after line in meter after meter,
> adjuncts to wine & witty conversation.
> And when I left you, I was so on fire
> with all your brilliant & ironic humor
> that after dinner I was still excited,
> and sleep refused to touch my eyes with quiet.
> In bed & totally unstrung by passion,
> tossing in agony, I prayed for sunrise,
> when I could be with you in conversation.
> But when my limbs, exhausted by their labor,
> lay on the bed in nearly fatal stillness,
> I made this poem for you, my beloved,
> so you could take the measure of my sorrow.
> I beg you to be kind to my petition,
> darling, for if you aren't, if you're cruel,
> then Nemesis will turn on you in outrage.
> Don't rile her up, please—she's a bitch, that
> goddess.

Martin is at his resourceful best as a translator here, keeping throughout to Catullus's eleven-syllable count and occasionally reproducing the phonic shape of a Catullan line (as in "I beg you to be kind to my petition") and frequently using English prosodic devices such as internal rhyme ("around for hours"; "as we'd agreed to") to approximate the insinuating, convivial cadences of the Roman hendecasyllables. (Martin makes happily liberal use of his own translations in his critical study.) In this deceptively simple verse epistle about how hard it is to stop writing sexy poetry, Catullus starts with words stressing the merry, ludic qualities of poetry ("lusimis"; "ludebat"; "iocum"; "vinum"; "lepore"; "facetiis"; and "otiosi," at leisure, which echoes in the next poem's "otium," the opposite of "neg-otium," business). Martin correctly speaks of "a neoteric manifesto, a red flag waved in the faces of the censorious elders such as Cicero, for whom the notion of a day stolen from the active life and given over wholly to joining a friend in the composition of erotic verse in a spirit of mutual naughtiness would have been a serious provocation indeed," and he compares the activities of "Japanese poets," though I think rather of such Tang Chinese poets as Li Po and Du Fu. But Catullus goes on to image the solitary pain of creation, or, more exactly, of yearning to create, in such words as "furore" and "semimortua" and "dolorem," —strong words.

The poem convivially celebrates the torments involved in being sexy in verse. Licinius Calvus, a poetic colleague and corebel of Catullus's, was also a successful orator and pol and a colleague of Cicero's; he moved in both worlds. The playful terms of palship that Catullus addresses to Calvus ("jucunde"—you cheerful guy; "ocelle"—

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eyehole buddy) have, *pace* the versions of Martin and of Lee, who is even worse with "precious" for "ocelle," nothing of the homoerotic in them; this is about guys and dactyls. Catullus is elsewhere perfectly capable of homosexual verse—in many poems of scabrous abuse and in his love poetry to Juventius, which is, paradoxically, so much more conventional in expression than the poems about Lesbia.

One of the bogeymen in Catullan studies that Martin spends much, perhaps too much, time exorcising is the notion that Catullus must be either "a spontaneous songbird" speaking from the heart and using *ingenium* (a popular Victorian view) or "a cerebral Alexandrian" working from the head and employing *ars* (as later revisionists stressed). Catullus was, of course, like Donne and the Shakespeare of the sonnets, both. Phrases like "quot basiationes" ("how many of your mega-kisses" [Lee]) or "novem continuas fututiones" ("nine uninterrupted fuctions" [Lee]) brandish Catullus's easy marriage of polysyllabicity and raunch.

Martin goes on to generalize about the next poetic generation: "The shutters of opportunity that Catullus and the neoterics had flung open were quickly closed by those who came after them," that is, by the versifying propagandists for "the imperial state." This is unfair and indeed untrue. In fact, the days of swashbuckling, impudent aristocrats were over, in Rome as in verse. In this sense, Catullus *could* have no heirs, any more than Ben Jonson could. But in art Catullus's influence took, profoundly. In lyric, Horace, at a different temperature and with differing strategies, became the Wallace Stevens of Rome; Martin misreads him as "a model of poetic decorum" to make a facile contrast to Catullus's "risk-taking venture." In elegy, Propertius and Tibullus and Ovid and their myths and their mistresses are all Catullan, as is, every now and then, even Virgil. Ovid found, however, to his cost that it would no longer do to play Catullus in life: Augustus was no John F. Caesar. And Catullus *qua* foul-mouthed scourge of purulent, stinking vice certainly lived on. What is Martial but, as Martial admits, a long footnote to Catullus? It took Juvenal to raise this strain to art. Both Martial and Juvenal, be it noted, eschew Catullan attacks on the living and powerful, although only Martial goes to the opposite extreme of groveling before them.

It is a measure of Charles Martin's stimulating book on Catullus that it can excite qualifying disagreement as well as enthusiastic assent. Martin has an uncanny instinct for the *social*, the convivial, the collegial assumptions and dimensions and inflections of Catullus's poetry. His ear is very alert to nuances of aggression in play and of play in aggression. He examines the function of invitations and get-togethers and assignations; he traces the significance of the exchange of gifts and of, er, bodily fluids in the verses. He picks up the social (and sociable) tones of voice in Catullus, and convinces us that this is very important indeed in a poet so much of whose work was precisely targeted at a network of friends and ex-friends and lovers and ex-lovers and enemies and . . . but I can't think of any *ex*-enemies. There is a Pope in Catullus as surely as there is a Keats.

Martin excels himself on poem 65, which starts by refusing a fellow-poet's plea for a poem-gift on the grounds that Catullus is mourning his brother. Poem 65 then transmutes its own grief into restorative art in the course of an amazing simile; having said it cannot sing for grief, it sings beautifully. And it then, further, turns out to be "merely" an introduction to a translated piece of Callimachean court-flattering fancy about a lock of Queen Berenice's hair becoming a constellation.

Martin's book, funny, moving, smart, alive to twentieth-century poetic developments, is now the best book on Catullus in English. It constitutes another fine entry in Yale's Hermes series, which, with urgent timeliness, strives to put before sophisticated general readers humane but critically focused discourse on the great Greco-Roman writers. It is good that classics, once

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derided as narrowly philological, elitist, and passé, should in this enterprise be a light unto the darkness that has fallen upon so many of its daughter disciplines.

The "I" of the storm

Winston S. Churchill
The World Crisis:
An Abridgment of the Classic
Four-Volume History of World War I.
Scribner's, 866 pages, $35

reviewed by David Fromkin

Winston Churchill's political life was a ride on a roller coaster. He began his first dizzying ascent to power when he received a ministerial post in December 1905. From there, despite an occasional folly, he went up and up at unheard of speed. He reached the heights for the first time in August 1914, at the age of thirty-nine: as First Lord of the Admiralty he became a national hero, lionized by the press and the public because he had anticipated the outbreak of war by mobilizing the Fleet. But he fell even further and faster than he had risen, his ruin accomplished in a mere matter of months by the disastrous Dardanelles expedition the following year, for which he was blamed and, indeed, vilified by critics to whom the frustrated young politician could not reply.

On May 17, 1915, the embattled young First Lord of the Admiralty arrived at the House of Commons to deliver a speech defending his conduct of the Dardanelles operation and announcing the name of the admiral he proposed to appoint as the new uniformed chief of the Navy. To his dismay, he learned that the Prime Minister would not permit him to speak. Thereafter, on security grounds, the government forbade Churchill to make public the documents and information that he believed would clear him. The dimensions of his disgrace at first were incomprehensible to him; it took days for him to realize that he was going to lose his high office.

The newspaper magnate Sir George Riddell recorded in his diary that when he visited Churchill at the Admiralty on May 20, 1915, the First Lord said: "I am finished! . . . Finished in respect of all I care for—the waging of the war; the defeat of the Germans . . . I have prepared a statement of my case, but cannot use it. The foreign situation prevents me from doing so."

May 26 was his last day as First Lord. In early June he told his constituents that "the archives of the Admiralty," when eventually they became available, would exonerate him: "It is to them that I look for my defense." Meanwhile his career in politics was in abeyance, at best; so he volunteered for active military duty, crossed over to France, and took his place as an Army officer in the front lines on the western front. When news reached him there of the Allied evacuation from Gallipoli—an operation that finally brought to a close the Dardanelles expedition—he wrote to a friend that "the tale has yet to be told to its conclusion."

But in crossing the Channel to France, Churchill had not left his Dardanelles problems behind. Once arrived in France in the autumn of 1915, he found that he was denied the command of a brigade, though the Prime Minister had promised it to him. The government would not take the chance that such an appointment might arouse criticism in parliament from those who felt that the botched Dardanelles campaign showed Churchill to be unfit.

Beginning in 1915, therefore, Churchill set out to press the case for being allowed to defend his record in the Dardanelles affair. In 1916 he succeeded in obtaining a promise from the government to undertake an official investigation of the entire matter.

But it was not until the end of 1919 that the final report of the official Dardanelles Commission was published. By then, Churchill had accumulated a cache of documents bearing upon the genesis, planning, and execution of the campaign, and had begun writing a narrative linking the documents. At the end of 1920 he went ahead to contract for book publication and newspaper serialization,

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after outlining for his publishers the shape of the book he proposed to write. He obtained permission to reprint confidential documents from the files; the Cabinet now agreed that it was only fair to allow him to produce the evidence that he believed would vindicate him.

His intention was to compose an apologia: a justification of his conduct as First Lord of the Admiralty. But works of history sometimes refuse to be shaped by their authors' intentions; the material imposes a design of its own. What began as the true story of the Dardanelles campaign became a personal account of Churchill's years at the Admiralty. Then it expanded into an account of the war at sea. But Churchill also had composed sections describing the land battles on the western front that were at the heart of the terrible international conflict. What started to emerge by 1922 was a manuscript that was something more than personal war memoirs but less than a full history of the war; and the unresolved tension between the two designs was to prove its enduring and fundamental flaw.

At the end of 1922 Churchill told his literary agents that he soon would have his history ready for serialization and publication. He now could work on it full time. After another long ride up to the political heights (1919-22), he again had fallen with breathtaking speed into the abyss. Once again his downfall had to do with British troops on the Turkish coast; this time Churchill's recklessness in the so-called Chanak incident had seemed to risk starting a new war. A Member of Parliament who dined with Churchill in November 1922 remembered that "Winston was so down in the dumps he could scarcely speak the whole evening. He thought his world had come to an end—at least his political world. I thought his career was over."

Without a seat in Parliament for the first time in twenty-two years, he went off to the Continent and spent six months writing in the south of France. The first volume was published in the spring of 1923, and the second in the autumn. But then Churchill no longer had much free time in which to write; he rose once again from the political dead. In 1924 he became Chancellor of the Exchequer, and it was not until 1927 that he was able to have volumes three and four ready for publication.

With the passage of time, what was becoming clear to Churchill was that some of the conflicts whose story he had told had not in fact been resolved by the surrender of the enemy powers in 1918: the end of his book did not mark the end of their stories. To carry these tales through to their conclusions (including his own role in them during his 1919-22 renaissance), he began work in March 1928 on *The Aftermath*, published a year later, which called itself "A Sequel" but soon became known as volume five.

The publication of Austrian and other memoirs inspired Churchill to amplify what he had written about the war. He had the time; he again was a lone wanderer in the political wilderness, this time on the India issue. In 1931 he published an additional volume in his war history, subtitled "The Eastern Front," in which he described the course of what he called "the unknown war" in eastern Europe: the war that pitted Russia and her Balkan allies against the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria. In the west this remains an unknown story despite the appearance of Churchill's volume (his least known) and, more recently, of Norman Stone's brilliant *The Eastern Front* (1975).

In 1931, too, Churchill published a one-volume edition of volumes one through four. The new condensed version was perhaps half the length. Though called an abridgment, it was much more than that: it was a rethinking and rewriting. Indeed calling it an abridgment was misleading, because the significant changes consisted, not in what Churchill had cut, but in what he had corrected and, above all, in what he had added. He was able to materially alter, amplify, and improve his earlier version in the light of the personal accounts, war memoirs, and hitherto secret documents that had flooded the market in the 1920s.

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With time he had acquired perspective—and accurate information. In his earlier version, he repeated the official French claim that the battle of the Marne began September 6; in his abridged version, he explained both why that claim was untrue and why it was made. In his earlier version, he devoted only a few paragraphs to the battle; in the abridged version, he devoted a chapter to it, showing why by 1931 he had come to believe it had been central to the story of the war.

He now wrote that "one must suppose upon the whole that the Marne was the greatest battle ever fought in the world. The elemental forces which there met in grapple and collision of course far exceeded anything that has ever happened. It is also true that the Marne decided the World War."

What was decided was that "never after the Marne had Germany a chance of absolute triumph." Within weeks the enemy armies had begun to settle into parallel systems of fortified entrenchments that eventually stretched from the Atlantic to the Alps. The trench warfare imposed a bloody four-year stalemate in which neither side could win and each destroyed the other. Churchill's new vision, in his one-volume edition, was that the battle of the Marne, fought at the outset of the conflict, decided "the fate of the war on land, and little else was left but four years of senseless slaughter." It was this vision of Churchill's that Barbara Tuchman decades later expanded into a book, her famous *The Guns of August*—a vision absent from the original edition and revealed only in the abridged version.

As of 1931, there therefore were one-volume, four-volume, five-volume, and six-volume versions of Churchill's memoirs of the First World War, each offering at least something different, all of which still are actively bought and sold today in British second-hand bookstores. It is the one-volume abridgment published in 1931 that Scribner's, Churchill's original American publishers, now have reprinted.

Scribner's and Thornton Butterworth, Churchill's British publishers, gave his war memoirs the title *The World Crisis*. It is a splendid title. But its broadness lent weight to the charge that Churchill took an exaggerated view of his own importance in the world's affairs. The grandiose title must have played at least some role in eliciting such comments as those of Arthur Balfour, former Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, who described *The World Crisis* as an "autobiography disguised as a history of the universe," or those of the other political colleague who reported that "Winston has written an enormous book about himself and called it *The World Crisis*."

To be fair, it should be said that at the very outset Churchill alerted his readers to the possibility that the pages to come would be at least as much concerned with his own crisis as with the world's. "Eight years have passed since I quitted the Admiralty," wrote Churchill in his Preface; "I feel it both my right and my duty to set forth the manner in which I endeavoured to discharge my . . . responsibilities."

But there was something conceited in the fundamental concept of the book: that one person's memoirs could be joined to a history of the world war to form a single narrative. Even readers who praised the book could not but notice how often the word "I" appeared. According to the *New Statesman*, when the first volume appeared, "He has written a book which is remarkably egotistical, but which is honest." Even a Churchillophile must smile when a passage such as "I always take the greatest interest in reading accounts of how the war came upon different people; where they were, and what they were doing" is followed by "so I shall . . . record exactly what happened to *me*" (emphasis added).

The repeated self-justifications in the narrative finally become annoying. The reader is conscious of special pleading even in the many instances where Churchill's case is strong on the merits. The editors of *Foreign Affairs* later were to write: "He argues terribly well in his own behalf—he is always plausible, not always convincing, seldom conclusive."

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In this, as in other respects, the one-volume abridgment is an improvement. It omits some of his more specious claims. On the other hand, it remains a book focused on its author: two-thirds of it is devoted to the years in which he served as First Lord of the Admiralty, and only one-third is given over to the two-thirds of the war during which he was (in the argot of the 1990s) "out of the loop."

Yet for all its lack of proportion, its partiality, and its flaws and limitations, *The World Crisis* remains the best-known history of the First World War.

Churchill was an author who knew how to please. He was a master storyteller: a Scheherazade among historians. His version of an episode almost always was the most memorable. Accounts of the foreign policies of the Great Powers stopped being the stuff of postgraduate theses or of professorial monographs; when they came from his pen, they became tales of international intrigue as gripping as any ghost story told around a campfire on a summer night.

To his mind, history is about individuals. This was not, and has not been, a fashionable view among academic historians in his time and ours. But the general reader always has been most interested in personality. Churchill's own powerful personality asserts itself in the pages of his histories; but—surprisingly, for a person so self-centered—he also was a portrait artist of enormous skill. His vivid characterizations of world leaders—people whom he had known personally—make them come alive for us, in all their quirky individuality.

His old-fashioned concept of history continues to strike a responsive chord. John Maynard Keynes, greatly praising *The World Crisis* in a book review, wrote that he envied Churchill "his undoubting conviction that frontiers, races, patriotisms, even wars if need be are ultimate verities for mankind, which lends for him a kind of dignity and even nobility to events, which for others are only a nightmare interlude." Indeed Churchill's was a conviction that could bring some comfort in circumstances where otherwise there would be none.

The most difficult thing for survivors of the First World War to accept was the triviality of the causes from which it then seemed to have arisen. The war, and the change, suffering, and destruction that it brought with it, were so enormous, while the quarrels between Austria and Serbia that engendered it were so petty and needless, and of such little consequence to the rest of humanity: it was hard for the mind to grasp that the one thing could have come from the other. It deprived suffering and death of a sense of meaning.

It was this that Churchill's vision supplied. He saw grandeur in the ancient nations arrayed against one another; he saw them in all their historic glory, won on battlefields over the course of a thousand years; he admired the martial skill and valor of foe and friend alike; while recognizing that war is terrible, he believed it noble to wage war; and he thrilled to the immensity of events—to drama on a grand scale, on a global scale. In the pages of his histories, individuals, causes, and peoples are larger—and better—than life. As Keynes suggested in his review, members of the war generation were grateful to Churchill for writing in such a way "of things which are part of the lives of all of us." He had allowed the worldwide victims of a meaningless freak accident in the Balkans to believe that their sacrifices and sufferings had a certain grandeur.

In the interwar years in which Churchill's volumes appeared, it was especially common to blame the Allies, as well as the Central Powers, for the devastating European civil war that had taken so many lives and ruined so many others; or to ascribe the outbreak of hostilities to the social or economic system of Europe—which was to say, either everybody was at fault or nobody was.

So Churchill's account stood out from the crowd. Thus, describing the last few hours before the British ultimatum to Germany became effective on August 14, 1914: "Once more now in the march of centuries Old England was to stand forth in battle against

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the mightiest thrones and dominations. Once more in defense of the liberties of Europe and the common right must she enter upon a voyage of great toil and hazard across waters uncharted, towards coasts unknown, guided only by the stars. Once more 'the far-off line of storm-beaten ships' was to stand between the Continental Tyrant and the dominion of the world."

The First World War, which led to the Second, was the most momentous event in history. Directly or indirectly, it led to the end of monarchy and empire—political institutions almost as old as the human race; to the freeing of Asia and Africa from Europe; to the legal equality of women; to the rise of fascism, nazism, and communism; to the killing, during the twentieth century, of at least 50 to 100 million people; to the splitting of the atom; to the creation of a rudimentary global economic community; to the men on the moon and the exploration of space . . .

Yet the First World War has not found its definitive historian. What is called for is a work that, at last, satisfactorily explains the origins of the war, taking account of the German documents published in the 1960s and 1970s and the debate they provoked; and that then goes on to tell the story of the war in just proportion. The chief difficulty is to show the relationship and relative importance of the three main battlefields—western Europe, central and eastern Europe, and the world ocean—to one another, and to the peripheral fields of battle in the Middle East, in Africa, in Asia, and in the Pacific. A parallel challenge is to show the interaction between what was happening on the various fields of battle and what was happening to society and the economy at home in the principal belligerent countries.

Perhaps no historian ever will be able to pull the sword from the stone: the definitive history of the First World War may never be written. But even if it should be written, and published, the public that reads it may well go on reading Churchill's book too; for *The World Crisis* tells, as used to be said, a rattling good tale.

Friendship & devotion

John M. Dunaway, editor
Exiles & Fugitives: The Letters of Jacques & Raïssa Maritain, Allen Tate & Caroline Gordon.
Louisiana State University Press, 111 pages, $22.50

reviewed by George Sim Johnston

The 1870s, which is to say the final years of the long pontificate of Pius IX, were not a boom decade for the Catholic intellect. There was, of course, John Henry Newman, but after Newman virtually nobody who merits attention today. This broad retreat of Catholic art and philosophy had much to do with the state of siege, both political and intellectual, in which the Church found itself at the time. Although he began his pontificate as a "liberal," Pius became increasingly disenchanted with the materialism and secularism of the late nineteenth century and spent his final two decades trying to barricade the Church against their onslaught. The *locus classicus* of this effort was the "Syllabus of Errors" of 1864, which condemned, among other propositions, the idea that "the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself . . . with progress, liberalism and modern civilization." The Church, in other words, said "no" to the nineteenth century—something, it might be argued, that much of the world is just now getting around to doing.

Whatever the merits of this posture for guarding the deposit of faith, it put a decided chill on Catholic thinking. Newman's own problematic relations with Rome after his conversion are an illustration of the difficulties that even a perfectly orthodox thinker could face in trying to cope with the rigid ecclesiastical norms of the day. The siege mentality began to lift under Pius's successor, Leo XIII, who gave Newman a cardinal's hat and launched a revival in Thomistic studies with the encyclical *Aeternis Patris*. (Aquinas, whom Lord Acton called "the first Whig," has always been a threat to reac-

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tionaries.) By the 1920s, a full Catholic intellectual revival was under way. Its English branch included Belloc, Chesterton, Waugh, Christopher Dawson, Eric Gill, David Jones, Maurice Baring, and Graham Greene; while in France there were Mauriac, Claudel, Péguy, Bernanos, Léon Bloy, Henri Ghéon, and two world-class philosophers, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain.

The striking thing about these names is the number of converts among them, as well as the number of novelists. Writers who are born Catholic seldom have much to say about a creed to which they have not given fifteen minutes consecutive thought since grade school. But in the case of converts like Waugh or Maritain, the faith, learned in adulthood, was very much involved in their struggle to come to grips with the modern world. The novel, a post-Catholic genre, was the favored vehicle for dealing with this struggle, which was seldom easily resolved. There is an "existential" note in many of these writers which simply did not lend itself to composing haiku or painting water lilies.

As is the case with most European intellectual trends, the Catholic revival made a delayed Atlantic transit. Whereas previously there had been only the stray lapsed Irishman, such as John O'Hara or F. Scott Fitzgerald, in the 1940s there appeared on the American literary scene a number of notable Catholics (again, mostly converts). A few of the names were Robert Lowell, Allen Tate and his wife Caroline Gordon, J. F. Powers, Flannery O'Connor, and Thomas Merton. With the exception of O'Connor and the early, pre-political Merton, however, none of these writers can be said to have had the sort of deep engagement with the faith which characterized their more fervent European counterparts.

Lowell, for example, seems to have used Catholicism as an intellectual quarry for his early poems and then dropped it once it had served its purpose. Powers's stories about priests were so on the mark that at least one critic surmised that he had once been a rectory cat; but in interviews he never seemed terribly excited about religion. Merton, a Trappist monk with great literary gifts, appeared on the way to becoming a great spiritual master; but somehow every cultural virus that was in the air in the Sixties found its way into his monastic cell; he became obsessed with left-wing politics and Buddhism, went AWOL, and died in a freak accident in Asia while searching for Zen illuminations.

Despite the many asymmetries of faith and accomplishment, the mandarins on the European side of the revival were surprisingly cordial to their American counterparts. Waugh, who once said that every American was born not only in Original Sin but also in "the extra sin of treason to the British crown," edited and wrote a foreword to the English edition of Merton's early autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and made a pilgrimage to Merton's monastery in Kentucky. Belloc and Chesterton made many friendships during their remunerative visits, although the latter in 1926 presciently remarked that "the madness of tomorrow is *not* in Moscow, but much more in Manhattan." Perhaps the most intriguing and long-lasting of the transatlantic alliances, however, was that between two famous literary couples —all converts—the epistolary remains of which have now been edited by John M. Dunaway. *Exiles and Fugitives: The Letters of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Allen Tate, and Caroline Gordon* provides some interesting sidelights on both ends of the Catholic revival.

The extraordinary partnership between Jacques and Raïssa Maritain began when both were students at the Sorbonne, where they met protesting the Tsar's Jewish pogroms (Raïssa was a Russian Jew). Both were disillusioned with the aggressive positivism which passed for truth at the university and made a pact that they would commit suicide if they did not find a reason for existence beyond the simple-minded metaphysics of their professors. They were rescued from this drastic step, first by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who taught that human consciousness is more than a mere secretion of matter, and then by the novelist Léon Bloy, who

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came as close as a modern can to being a man of the twelfth century. Bloy took Jacques and Raïssa beyond Bergsonian intuition (which Bloy called "a too flimsy refuge" against the nihilism of the age) and into the Catholic Church.

The other epochal event of Jacques' life was his discovery of Thomas Aquinas and the other great Scholastics. He found in their realist philosophy an antidote to what he considered the gravest defects of modern civilization: the flight from metaphysics and the exaltation of private whim over objective truth. Maritain's Thomistic critique of modernity struck a chord with a number of thinkers, ranging from T. S. Eliot to Walter Lippmann, who had no interest in becoming Roman Catholics. But it did influence the conversion of the poet Allen Tate, whose classicism already disposed him to the neo-Scholastic world view. Tate followed his wife, the novelist Caroline Gordon, into the Church in the late 1940s.

In 1944, Tate, who had just become editor of the *Sewanee Review*, wrote to Maritain asking for a contribution. The Maritains at the time were living in New York as exiles from Vichy France. The usual exchange of politeness followed, which quickened into friendship, for which both couples had a kind of genius. In France, the Maritains had turned their home into a "centre de rayonnement" for a generation of artists and writers. The Tates, more in the American manner, had allowed their place to be a crash pad for literary nomads. (Lowell, for example, turned up uninvited one summer and pitched a tent on their lawn.) So the meeting of the two couples resulted in a kind of *summa* in the art of friendship.

Reading these letters, we get the odd impression of freshness and vitality in the Old World rather than the New. The Maritains were a much deeper pair than their American friends. Jacques liked to quote Aristotle to the effect that the magnanimous move at a slow step. He and Raïssa seemed to manage this (and so were extremely productive), while at the Tates' end there is constant fuss and self-preoccupation. The intellectual mentorship was strictly one way, moreover, with Jacques and Raïssa gently encouraging and praising the efforts of Tate, a not quite major poet, and his wife, a definitely minor novelist. (Gordon, like Percy Lubbock, was better at helping other novelists with their craft than practicing it herself.) And, of course, there was the contrast between Allen's philandering and ultimate divorce from Caroline (he ended in marrying a twenty-six-year-old former nun, getting excommunicated along the way) and the Maritains' *marriage blanc*. In 1912, when both were about thirty, Jacques and Raïssa made a private vow to abstain from sexual relations, an ascetical practice which they never recommended to others and which the Tates probably never suspected.

Given the absence of an English biography of the Maritains and the likelihood that readers don't know much about the Tates, one wishes that Dunaway had given these letters a more informative textual apparatus. His footnotes, moreover, are alarmingly whimsical. Malcolm Cowley, whose one steady full-time job was Associate Editor of *The New Republic* from 1929 to 1944, is identified as "a film critic for the New York *Times*." Another note tells us that Josef Pieper "has taught and written in the United States since World War II," which would be news to the University of Münster. I don't wish to dwell on editorial lapses in a book coming out of a university press, however, as the only literary professionals who seem to take pains to be accurate anymore are the writers of the backs of baseball trading cards.

The correspondence ends with an exchange between Caroline and Jacques after the publication of the latter's *The Peasant of Garonne*, a remarkably vigorous book from a man of eighty-five. In it, Maritain, who had always been identified as a political liberal, attacked leftist theologians who took the Church's turn to *aggiornamento* as meaning that it would toss away two thousand years of doctrinal teaching. This, along with a critique of the mytho-scientific nonsense of Teilhard de Chardin, sent Maritain's reputa-

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tion into eclipse for at least two decades. It was a disillusioning period for Maritain and his great contemporary, Gilson, who saw their work to build a bridge between classical philosophy and the modern world widely rejected in favor of a spurious "relevance." It shows the greatness of spirit of Maritain, who after Raïssa's death eventually took the habit of the little brothers of Toulouse, that he was not at all bitter—simply tired.

Jacques, who described himself as "a European long immersed in all the rotten stuff of past events," found obvious refreshment in a country which enjoyed a "deliverance" from history. Yet, in the perspective of this volume, even forty years ago the degradation of the American academy was well under way. Caroline Gordon writes that Maritain was "treated shamefully by Princeton University" in the early Fifties. The head of the philosophy department "urged him 'not to give the boys so much Plato and Aristotle but more Bertrand Russell and Whitehead.' He delivered the lectures which were finally published as *Creative Intuition* to a bunch of housewives."

Then, as now, the intellectual establishment willfully cut itself off from the accumulated wisdom of the past. So, while these letters contain much enjoyable information (what, we wonder, became of the peacock feather from Flannery O'Connor's farm that Caroline sent to Jacques), they ought not to be an occasion for excessive literary nostalgia.

Object lessons

Henry Petroski
The Evolution of Useful Things.
Knopf, 288 pages, $24

reviewed by Paul Rand

This truly remarkable book, with its truly unremarkable title, is a page turner. Here, for example, in the engineer-author's untechnical language, is a sample of its contents that is both amusing and revealing: "It is said to have been Cardinal Richelieu's disgust with a frequent dinner guest's habit of picking his teeth with the pointed end of his knife that drove the prelate to order all the points of his table knives ground down." Not only does this book tell us about the evolution of familiar artifacts such as flatware, but it also tells us about the multitudes who designed and used them. Quoting from *The Evolution of Technology* by George Basalla, the author provides us another wonderful anecdote: "In 1867 Karl Marx was surprised to learn . . . that five hundred different kinds of hammers were produced in Birmingham, England, each one adapted to a specific function in industry or the crafts." This kind of information is fascinating, not in spite of, but because of, the familiar things it talks about.

The Evolution of Useful Things is as much a social history as it is a technological treatise, a description that also applies to Henry Petroski's previous books, *The Pencil* and *To Engineer Is Human*. All relate to everyday objects rather than to exotic ones—how pins turned into paper clips; how styrofoam containers for hamburgers evolved; and how "Post-it" Notes came about. The list is endless, and it is easy to imagine that the author is well into his next tome.

More, perhaps, than anything else, Mr. Petroski reminds us not to take things for granted. (His book is both an object lesson and a lesson about objects.) But this is not all he has to tell us. Supplying us with so many different artifacts, he has also tried to illustrate, with the help of some of his theories, the evolution of these artifacts. In his preface Mr. Petroski describes his book as "a refutation of the dictum that 'form follows function.'" In its place he offers the debatable proposition that "form follows failure." In this, I believe, he is skating on thin ice. "Here," Mr. Petroski asserts, "is the central idea: the form of made things is always subject to change in response to their real or perceived shortcomings, their failures to function properly." This hypothesis, it seems, is clearly an assumption that is both too broad and too narrow. To claim, as the author does, that "this principle governs all

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invention, innovation, and ingenuity" seems to be stretching a point, because it disregards those sources of inspiration that have nothing whatever to do with failure, mechanical or otherwise. It also fails as a unifying principle, simply because failure does not represent, as does function, the end of the design process.

If one, incidentally, were to take the maxim "form follows failure" at face value, the leaning tower of Pisa would make a striking example; but this, I doubt, is what Mr. Petroski had in mind. This concept of failure, even if a bit gimmicky, is interesting, but I doubt that it can be seen as a universal truth. Sophistry, somehow, is in the air. In the evolutionary process of an artifact, failure is merely one of a long list of incentives to change. The probability of failure as part of the evolutionary process of design is certainly a valid one, but so are the probabilities of need, want, order, chance, whim, obsolescence, fancy, faith, intuition, purpose, curiosity—ad infinitum. Once something works, once a failure is corrected, the evolutionary process is complete—but only after function is realized.

Some of the author's other ideas, I believe, are equally difficult. "Whereas the shortcomings of an existing thing may be expressed in terms of a *need* for improvement," writes Mr. Petroski, "it is really *want* rather than need that drives the process of technological evolution. Thus we may need air and water, but generally we do not require air conditioning or ice water in any fundamental way." Anyone who has spent time in a movie house on a sultry summer's day surely will wish to spell want N-E-E-D. "We may find food indispensable," he continues, "but it is not necessary to eat it with a fork. Luxury, rather than necessity, is the mother of invention." The author forgets that there is such a thing as table etiquette, and countless other things that may turn needs into wants and vice versa. This argument, carried to its logical conclusion, would eliminate the need for almost any artifact. Robinson Crusoe managed.

Many artifacts are changed for reasons that have nothing to do with poor function, and even if they were, this might not in any way affect their appearance. Mechanical improvements do not necessarily create new forms; failure is but one contributing factor among many. Nostalgia and sentimentality are often more persuasive against change than is creativity. The old bridge on Bridge Street, near the Westport Railroad station, built in 1884, is currently being restored to its original state, and not being replaced by a modern structure. (It originally replaced a wooden bridge built in 1869, which was destroyed by termites.) Here form follows the bridge's original function. Postmodern design is also steeped in nostalgia, as well as old forms, and not in discovering new ones. The success of these structures is due to this appeal to sentimentality and nostalgia. Evolution which implies improvement is very often no more than restoration.

Here is another attempt to support the "form follows failure" thesis: "Whether self-generated or heard from others, whether couched in crass terms of coming up with a million-dollar idea or in utopian dreams of wasteless societies, whether expressed in Anglo-Saxon concretions or in Latinate, polysyllabic abstraction, dissatisfaction with existing artifact is at the core of all invention and hence all changes in made things." If the idea of "dissatisfaction with existing artifacts" is not limited to failure of some kind, there is obviously no basis for disagreement. But, in the course of the evolution of artifacts, preferences and prejudices are powerful forces, as are innumerable other forces. Most of Thomas Jefferson's inventions, for example, were the result of special needs or wants that had nothing to do with failure.

"Whereas shape and form," writes Mr. Petroski, "are the fundamental subjects of this book, the aesthetic qualities of things are not among its primary concerns. Aesthetic considerations may certainly influence, and in some cases even dominate, the process whereby a designed object comes finally to look the way it does, but they are seldom the first causes of shape and form, with jewelry

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and objets d'art being notable exceptions." This statement seems to imply that aesthetics, on the one hand, and shape and form, on the other hand, are mutually exclusive. In fact, though, there are many examples of artifacts besides jewelry and objets d'art that depend primarily on aesthetic considerations for their shape and form.

We know that a knife is a knife and that its basic form to fit its function was established long ago. Therefore, aesthetic considerations are really the only ones left for the designer who is asked to create a new design. The Queen Anne pattern, for instance, which was designed almost three centuries ago, is perhaps the most beautiful flatware extant. Here the designer's problem had nothing to do with the shape of the blade, unless he chose to change it; functional considerations were not nearly as important as aesthetic ones.

"When aesthetic considerations dominate the design of a new silverware pattern," Mr. Petroski continues, "the individual implements, no matter how striking and well balanced they may look on the table, can often leave much to be desired in their feel and use in the hand." But the author has neglected to tell us that the opposite can also be true. A sensitive designer could have affected not only the appearance but also the function of the knife, which is exactly what the designer of the Queen Anne pattern did. He could have altered the relationship between blade and handle; or reshaped both so that they would be more comfortable to the hand *and* more pleasing to the eye.

But none of this tells us anything about the role or even the meaning of form, the inseparable, aesthetic side of the equation. To those who have been complacently sharing the beliefs of true believers—of the sculptor Horatio Greenough (1805-1852), for example, or of the great American architect and mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan (1856-1924)—this must come as a surprise. Greenough says that "beauty [form] is the promise of function," and Sullivan tells us that "'form follows function' is a rule of discovery and experience, and its implications would have more clearly been recognized if it had been stated: function creates form . . . functions seek their forms."

Does it work? is not only a question of function, it is also a question of form. Is it beautiful? Is it appropriate? Is it useful? These are some of the other concerns. What something looks like is its aesthetic quality, regardless of its purpose or function, or whether it was designed by an engineer, an artist, an architect, or by chance, intuition, or intention. The George Washington Bridge (1927), incidentally, is a good example of design by chance. The steel skeleton that we know was originally intended to be clad in masonry, but lack of funds, not functional failure, determined its form—its soaring silver silhouette against the New York City sky. "Form follows function"—or, more specifically, form follows the stringencies of restraint, simplicity, and economy.

Is the origin of the great monuments to culture the product of "form follows failure"? The Parthenon, the Mosque of Santa Sophia in Istanbul, and the great Gothic cathedrals are true products of man's ingenuity and faith. Faith, I believe, plays a far greater role than failure in the production of most artifacts. The Shakers, for example, a religious, communal, celibate sect (sometimes called Shaking Quakers), produced some of the most beautiful and useful buildings, utensils, farm equipment, tableware, furniture, and tools. The invention of the circular saw, the flat broom, and the clothespin, for example, indicate that while the Shakers' heads were looking toward heaven their feet were on the ground. "Form follows function" was their way of life. Faith, simplicity, restraint, and honesty were their means, perfection their goal. In the secular world, the philosophy of the Bauhaus expressed similar views.

Both the Shakers' quest for perfection and their work ethic were shared by the Japanese, whose art and artifacts had, and still have, a profound influence on Western design, from bamboo objects to lacquerware, tools, tableware, machines, cameras, computers, automobiles, and video equipment, to some of the great examples of the artisan's and ar-

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chitect's skills. Katsura palace is the paragon of the spirit of "form follows function."

One can be sure that form always follows man's ingenuity. But one cannot be sure that form always follows failure, or that the dictum is universally valid. We can't even be sure that the maxim "form follows function" is *always* valid. We can be sure that, with few exceptions, the solutions to functional problems are finite, whereas those to formal ones are infinite. The impulse to creation knows no exceptions—fashionable or practical. Cosmetics or jewelry, flatware or footware, hammers or nails—it is the urge to invent, to solve problems, visual or mechanical, that really matters.

In spite of what has been said about the author's theories, this book is a monument to the historian's curiosity and the engineer's tenacity. It is a treasure trove of fascinating facts and amusing anecdotes. It is a contribution, not only to the history of the evolution of artifacts, but also to the history of design, of prejudices and preferences, and of the vicissitudes of taste.

Mute, gilded howling

Gjertrud Schnackenberg
A Gilded Lapse of Time.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 143 pages, $19

reviewed by Robert Richman

A Gilded Lapse of Time is Gjertrud Schnackenberg's third book of poems, and quite a book it is. It breaks the seven-year silence since the publication of her previous collection, *The Lamplit Answer* (her first book, *Portraits and Elegies*, appeared in 1982). According to testimony in these new poems, this silence was the result not of Schnackenberg's perfectionism but rather of certain qualms she had developed about poetry, qualms that, if we are to take her at her word, forced her for a time to stop writing verse altogether. To many followers of the current poetry scene, Schnackenberg's silence—so different from the publish-or-perish mentality that so many academic poets exhibit—will seem to have been as artfully contrived as the poems that gushed forth after the spell was broken.

Schnackenberg's work has always been steeped in the past, but the historical sweep of *A Gilded Lapse of Time* is breathtaking. Part I, which runs thirty-nine pages, is crammed with allusions, not only to Dante, around whom this section revolves, but also to Plato, Boccaccio, Saint Augustine, Pindar, Horace, Virgil, Theon of Smyrna, Gogol, and the Bible. (The second and third parts, which deal respectively with scenes from the Passion narrative and the life of Osip Mandelstam [1891-1938], the doomed Russian poet, are also loaded with references.) Some readers have a low threshold for a display of erudition in poets. But Schnackenberg's learning is worn lightly. She feels passionately, and by her passion persuades us, that the past is a necessary burden for the poet. Nothing, in her view, illuminates our age better than history's roster of triumphs and disasters. It is difficult to disagree. Schnackenberg draws numerous illuminating historical parallels: between Dante and Mandelstam, for example, two poets whose work offended the political powers in their respective lands and caused their exile, and, in the latter's case, untimely death. She also suggests a useful correspondence between the Roman emperor Tiberius, with his informants and spies and groundless charges of treason, and Stalin, whose paranoia and megalomania, like the emperor's, knew no bounds. Tiberius's words in "Tiberius Learns of the Resurrection"—"*Man is a lamp that goes out when / I wave my hand*"—could be those of Stalin or any number of twentieth-century dictators.

The first part of *A Gilded Lapse of Time* recounts the poet's journey, in a time of spiritual need, to Ravenna, the city that harbored the exiled Dante. But Ravenna's "glittering floors and marble lakes" offer little solace, for today the city is one big Price Club of Byzantine relics and artifacts. Dashing the poet's high spiritual expecta-

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tions is a tacky array of tour guides, restoration teams, trash heaps, and holy places where God exists in name only:

> I have visited every fountain in the guidebook,
> And loitered at the crumbling rims
> Of baptistry fonts whose quarter-inch
> Of water lies gilded beneath
> The ceiling mosaic's tremorous, rhythmic
> hymns,
> Where God is a word written into the ceiling
> Under planets shining even by day—
>
> And outdoors in the city traffic,
> I've crossed and recrossed these city squares
> As if I were pacing them off, as if
> I had dropped everything to come and look,
> As if there were nothing to do but thumb
> The index for the names of goddesses
> Who cried at these sites and springs arose
> Beneath their feet . . .

In this spiritual desert, the "*imago Dei*" is nothing but "a radiant blur, reflected, elusive"; God has been pressed into an "inaccessible vault" where He presides over "a stone floor." The poet, put off by this weak God who has been "driven . . . into the high gilt corner / Of a tesserae-shattered wall," longs for the powerful one who created the cosmos: "you've forgotten that you made the world," Schnackenberg writes, "To boil at its heart with boiling stone." No wonder she cannot, as she writes, "Surrender up to you, / Messiah . . ." As for Dante's tomb, the focal point of her journey, it is "[a]n empty place the rain is rending."

Ravenna's parade of art and *objets d'art* also disturbs the poet. The pavement near Dante's tomb, the poet writes, has been "broken up, / Numbered, and hauled off / To a museum crypt." The "streaks of blue" on a mosaic ceiling, meanwhile, only remind her of the actual, and thus superior, canal on which the image is based, one with "terrible / Smells stirred up by bargemen's poles." It is here, in this empty shrine to a lost world, that the poet acquires her block. For here, among the myriad tombs, churches, and museums, the poet begins to doubt poetry, not because it cannot reproduce the "Smells stirred up by bargemen's poles" but, more important, because it is unable to apprehend human suffering. Anguish, Schnackenberg feels, is too "sacred" for poetry; hence her fear "That if I spoke [about misery] I would taste blood." "Leave the unconceived alone, unborn!" she tells herself, "Leave them hidden above this smear of blood! / If you would love them, do this much for them, / To let them be." So when the guard closes the door to Dante's tomb, she hears "a deeper set of doors slam shut, / . . . / As if the doors of the kingdom [of poetry] had closed behind me."

Schnackenberg's silence appears to be sanctioned by God. God, after all, "promulgates / The laws of bliss whereby we are meant / To turn our backs on the pain / Of the condemned when we're forgiven." (This law of Paradise had already been alluded to by the poet when she wrote that "no one [in heaven] may / Observe the suffering of humans . . . below.") Back at her hotel, the poet tries to imagine God's heavenly perspective—a perspective, Schnackenberg suggests, that is akin to that of the agony-effacing poet. Despite her desire to understand a God who tells the absolved to ignore the damned, she cannot but hear "that weeping there below." At the end of Part I, Schnackenberg rejects her God-sanctioned silence, during which she had temporarily turned her "back / On the source of poetry."

In the second part, entitled "Crux of Radiance," the poet and her newly liberated voice consider scenes from the Passion narrative. In the seven poems that make up this part, the poet still seems troubled by art that masks grief. But no longer does the issue render her poetically mute. In "Soldier Asleep at the Tomb," one of the three Piero della Francesca paintings that Schnackenberg discusses, the soldier who is sleeping through his watch—and is thus, it is suggested, blind to historical calamity—is Piero himself. This is apt, for the poet's words to Piero could be addressed to all artists, including herself:

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Don't let your head
Tilt back, don't look up toward
The heaven's starry gulf and close your eyes,
Because you must not fall
Asleep. You must not sleep—
In Rome they crucified a dog
And carried it across
The city crucified upon its cross
Because once, long ago,
A dog, in his old age
Slept through his watch . . .

A similar point is made in "Angels Grieving over the Dead Christ," a poem about the epitaphios of Thessaloniki, an ancient length of liturgical cloth. Here, Schnackenberg wants to expose the truth behind the ravishing bits of silk she sees sequestered in a museum case. She writes that the silk had been found "During one of those treasure hunts conducted / In the burying grounds." She further reveals that the silk came from worms smuggled into Constantinople, as she writes, "in the head of a walking stick." Like the real Ravenna that corrects the poet's exalted idea of it, the historical truth behind these gorgeous bits of cloth revises them in her eyes, too. "Take heed," she warns the naïve viewer of this hardly naïve cloth,

. . . This is the work
Of Byzantine silk slaves confined
To the palace grounds at Constantinople,

And you must beware.
This was a way station
On the Silk Road
Where authorities executed

Traitors in a wooden box
In innumerable, unspeakable ways.

The poet, who earlier was speechless before history's calamities, now invokes them every chance she gets. What most obsesses Schnackenberg, however, is the pain at the heart of all creation. No making, whether it be that of the silkworm, the poet, or God, is free of its agony, its hardship, its unsightly afterbirth. Schnackenberg's poems on this topic recall those of Rosanna Warren and Geoffrey Hill, two poets who are also vigilant about history-absolving art and the myth of creation.

The tragedy of Osip Mandelstam, the great Russian poet who defied the Soviets, is another historical truth in danger of being erased. Mandelstam was arrested in 1934 for writing an anti-Stalin epigram and died four years later, after another arrest, in a transit camp. And yet, although Mandelstam openly defied Stalin, and in so doing hastened his own downfall, his difficult, highly subjective poetry was more than enough to vex a spiteful, murderous Soviet regime. In fact, Mandelstam's work and legacy were ripe for obliteration by the Soviet authorities. Had it not been for the extraordinary efforts of Mandelstam's widow, Nadezhda, who preserved her husband's poems and wrote two memoirs of him—*Hope Against Hope* (1970) and *Hope Abandoned* (1974)—they would have been lost to posterity.

About midway through the section devoted to Mandelstam, entitled "A Monument in Utopia," we are taken inside a modern-day Russian library where the senate's statue in honor of Poetry catches Schnackenberg's eye. The monument's utter inapplicablity to Mandelstam, or to any historically "real" poet, is crystal-clear:

You will be free to wander
In the metropolitan library,
Free to stare,
Without arousing suspicion,
At the statue voted by the senate
To honor Poetry,
Once a block of undifferentiated marble
Originally destined, in the old life,
For a grandiloquent hotel lobby
In the Empire's style, hinting at transports
Of stone in wobbling wheelbarrows driven
Along filthy lanes by men whose fingernails
Are suitable for decapitating fleas
And scratching their beards as if
They sandpapered a shadow—
Once a block of marble,

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Yet now a spirit glinting in the room,
With a starry hoard of words
Like tiny prisms on its lips.

Although the rhapsodes themselves
Will be banished from the reading rooms
To the public park, exiles
Even from the reconstructed life,
Framed in the library's windows,
They will reappear in bronze
Along the radiating paths,
Among the avenues of limes, for miles;
They will populate the gravel walks
In greatcoats, holding hats and books,
Although with interchangeable heads
In deference to changing tastes and styles.
Among the reveries of oval ponds
Like looking-glasses with drifting swans,
None will be represented pushing a wheel-
barrow,
No man, with his head between his knees,
Will be seated and puking between his feet,
No scarecrow with his hands
Fastened beneath his armpits,
Looking cautiously over his shoulder
From his gravel mound,
Will thus indicate the wind-chill factor
On the "date of death unknown."

A truer rendition of "The Poet," Schnackenberg suggests, would have been a figure "seated and puking between his feet." Even more comically unreal, however, is the image of bronze rhapsodes on gravel walks wearing, as Schnackenberg writes, "greatcoats, holding hats and books." Mandelstam never owned a proper winter coat; and his books were sold by his widow for a food package that was destined to be returned from the prison, in Nadezhda's words, "because of the death of the addressee."

Schnackenberg prefers to discuss Mandelstam, then, not in legendary or heroic terms but as a real man. The childhood possessions she invokes fit glove-tight to her purpose:

And that bookcase from your childhood—
Never to be recovered, of course—
That bookcase your parents moved
From one apartment to the next,
From Maximilian Lane to
Ofitserskaja Street to Zagorodnyj Prospekt,
The one you saved, and saved, and saved,
And *then* lost

As you fled the ravine that opened up
Between two revolutions
While families peeped from basement
windows
Along one of those black boulevards
We see in the peripheries of
A glass of boiled water
At whose rim you sniffed the lead pipes
Of waterworks from the Golden Age—

Your childhood encyclopedia
With those names that had not yet begun
To boil on the maps,
And the gilt-edged Bible's
Whiff of smoking Paradise
Among the gutted Hebrew letters,

And the flattened hemispheres
With the seven blue oceans
You had thumbed threadbare,
Your schoolboy Herzen
With your scribbled drawing
Of a man seated at the base of the "wall
Which cannot be destroyed,"

Your Hans Christian Andersen's
Nightingale, where there is a courtier
Of such importance that, when a man
Of lower rank dares to ask him a question,
He habitually answers only "P,"
Which means nothing at all;

And Baudelaire, Hugo, Lamartine,
The choices of a French governess . . .

Schnackenberg's main point—that the past contains the key to the future, and very often *is* the future—goes against the view, common to so many progressive thinkers, that we should forgo the error-filled past for a future that is radiant and bright. This is the view of the Soviet civil servant quoted in Part III: "*I thought the ages rolled away from us / Not toward us.*" It is also the view of God,

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who teaches the absolved to forget the damned, as well as that of the unknowing angels in "Angels Grieving over the Dead Christ" who want to, as the poet writes, "saw the present from the past." It is also the view of the French novelist Victor Hugo, who with a beard "like a mantle of / Century-old wisteria," as Schnackenberg writes, "had declared / That torture was at an end / Around the world, and had raised / His glass to that thought."

And yet, as vigilant as Schnackenberg is about the past, she makes an eloquent case against it in the closing pages of *A Gilded Lapse of Time*. In these final, exquisite pages, Schnackenberg depicts a world without history—one without, as she puts it, "archives" or "witnesses":

> If I could begin again,
> Time is something I would measure
> In the generations of roses, evolving across
> Gulfs we have no records of,
> Eons without archives,
> Eras without witnesses,
> Without surviving portraits . . .
>
> If I could begin again,
> I would measure time in the generations of
> Roses, and not the succession
> Of rulers of men . . .

Unhappy with an art that is inattentive to history, Schnackenberg turns to history, but history too disenchants. Thus her wish to end her poem contemplating, not Stalin or Nero or the truth about beautiful objects, but the "pink-golds, rose-golds, [and] gold-reds" of roses that evolve "with nothing in mind." What the history-sated poet now seeks, in short, is ignorant roses that clamber "past borders / And successions of years"; unwitting roses that reach for "resurrections expressed without / Faith or doubt"; blind roses that pile up "their treasure heedlessly / In the vaults of air."

Schnackenberg does not wish to disavow all that precedes her reversal; she only wants to leaven the message a bit. Indeed, her refusal even to attempt to reconcile her opposed views about history and heedless beauty is no flaw. To be a witness, and to refuse the role: both deeds, she implies, are imperative for the poet.

Schnackenberg's wide knowledge of the history, literature, and philosophy of the past allows her to skip her ideas like so many stones across the water of time. A quick cutting from present to past is one of the main features of Mandelstam's poetry, too. The relative density of *A Gilded Lapse of Time* is also something she seems to have done out of respect for her hero. All told, Schnackenberg's tribute to Mandelstam is poignant, relevant, and worthy of him in every way.

Out of touch

Thomas Bender Intellect & Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 179 pages, $31.95

reviewed by James Bowman

As in his previous book, *New York Intellect* (1987), it is part of Thomas Bender's purpose in his new book on American intellectual life to take his fellow academic intellectuals to task for allowing themselves to get too far out of touch with the rest of the world. In making his case he demonstrates why they have done so. That is to say, he has taken a theme of considerable general interest, which is the fate of the educated public since the late nineteenth century, and he has written it up in such an impenetrably academic style that I would be astonished if more than half a dozen non-academics ever peep between its covers. His own version of his subject, for example, is the transition from "civic professionalism" to "disciplinary professionalism" among academics—by which he means that professors have for a century been more loyal to their professional mysteries than to their cities.

More seriously, he has left out all the most interesting stuff about such a subject. I am

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prepared to believe, as Bender insists throughout, that there was a Kuhnian paradigm shift involved in the development of the academic disciplines and that their structure was not "inherent in the immanent unfolding of modern knowledge," but he never makes clear why I should believe it. I accept that science only gradually retreated from the public forum into the academy, where it became the property of a priestly caste (which brings up, by the way, my suggestion for a science-fiction novel: a Scientific Reformation in which some latter-day Luther of the laboratories nails his theses to the door of the National Science Foundation proclaiming the professoriate of all believers), but he has far too little to say about how or why such a thing happened.

It may be, for instance, that when Horace Mann spoke of the public lectures at the Lyceum in 1839 as "interesting and useful" but also "superficial" it was because of "changes in the city as a context for intellectual work." It may also be because they were superficial. Our naïve assumption—that as knowledge increases in detail and complexity (as it happened to be doing at the time) it becomes increasingly difficult to assimilate and understand and therefore, by its very nature, it simply excludes more and more of the public—remains uncorrected by anything that Bender writes, though he insists it is naïve. We begin to wonder if he is in need of a visit to Occam's barbershop.

Why, we want to ask, did the shift from civic to disciplinary professionalism happen more or less at the same time in all developed countries? Is it possible to believe that there was a simultaneous breakdown of public, urban culture not only in all American cities but in the cities of Europe as well? And if there was a balance between the internal logic of scientific progress and something happening independently in the sociology of urban communities, what was the balance? Bender writes of the abandonment of "traditional rituals of accreditation" in the mid-nineteenth century but tells us neither what these were nor why they were abandoned. Maybe such details will appear in his promised monograph *History and Public Culture*, but they are conspicuously absent here.

Bender is good on Charles Beard and the academicization of history and political science, but when he gets on to economics and literature his own political subtext becomes seriously distorting. He writes coyly of how "laissez faire capitalism" was "associated with" social unrest, as if such an assertion was unproblematical and enough to dismiss classical economics as outmoded science. He then does not explore the ways in which the new, radical thinking in economics, with its emphasis on social action, seems to run precisely counter to the tendency among the pure sciences (that he mentions but also does not explore) to become more cloistered.

He seems to think that the discrepancy is accounted for in the paradigmatic figure of E. R. A. Seligman of Columbia, who was instrumental in the founding of both the American Economic Association and the American Association of University Professors and so appears to be the ultimate in "disciplinary professionalism." Seligman, says Bender, "staked out an intermediate position . . . between the old laissez faire economists and the more radical new economists"—a position which turns out to be the radical economists' ends pursued by mandarin economists' methods: "He pressed for ameliorative and realistic rather than radical or utopian social change."

What is "intermediate" about this? Because Seligman remained firmly of the academy, only venturing out to advise the government on the implementation of such progressive measures as the income tax, Bender appears to imagine that his brand of economics involved no "moral judgments or ideological statements." He shows that the pattern, so familiar to us since, of academics circling the wagons to protect radicals in their midst from outside attack was established by Seligman and others before the turn of the century, but it is disingenuous of him to claim that the result was "a stronger profession and one that favored the center."

This "center" turns out in fact to consist of the fin-de-siècle precursor of that narrow

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range of academic orthodoxy which is the real reason for the university's comparative isolation from public life. What Bender calls "the service ideal"—made necessary, he says, by the conjunction of academic professionalism and "the historical method" imported from Germany—was really radicalism by other means. But it was the kind of surreptitious radicalism, hidden under such scientific-sounding phrases as "the historical method," in which the academic world has specialized ever since. Bender does not, however, consider the possibility that another reason why the professors lost their public audience was that most of the public prefers straight talk.

Straight talk is, in fact, another thing that Bender himself is not very good at. This, even more than the political subtext (only made explicit when he can't resist calling Lynne Cheney a "conservative anti-intellectual"), is what makes his chapter on Lionel Trilling particularly offensive and patronizing. I ask you, who is Thomas Bender that Lionel Trilling should be mindful of him? Here is a man who airily gives himself of the opinion that Trilling was "not really a close student of ideas . . . and his command of intellectual history was limited" and yet who is capable of writing a sentence like this:

> The collapse of intellectual vitality in American towns and cities coupled, perhaps, with an antiurban resentment of the metropolis opened the way for the rise of a multicentered and nonlocal system of professionalism stressing individual membership and the fragmentation of elites.

Or this:

> For all its limits, it is important to recognize that the rise of expertise was embedded in a transformation of the public sphere that, however imperfectly conceptualized and realized, might well be characterized as democratic in its tendencies and potential.

Some sphere! Some rise! Trilling would have sent this puppy back to freshman English to learn to write an English sentence. His views on Trilling's command of intellectual history are *ipso facto* laughable.

This is not a trivial or incidental point. Bender adopts the fashionable academic view that Trilling and those who still invoke his authority are engaged in a "nostalgic" exercise in appealing to a middle-class readership that is gone beyond recall. Yet the English language affords no niche to the merely nostalgic in the way that the Benderian idiolect does to the merely academic. Trilling wrote in the language of Shakespeare and Keats and Dickens for an audience of any class which had read and understood those authors; Bender writes in the language of Ph.D. theses for an audience of the academic class whose tendency to speak only to itself he then wonders at. If the fault of nostalgia is being out of touch with reality, who is more out of touch with reality here?

Of course, we know that Trilling's real sin, as Bender more than once hints, was his implicit acceptance of the *embourgeoisement* of culture, which in the radical view removed too much from the political realm and gave it to the personal. And it is for this reason that we should be particularly on our guard against Bender's prescriptions for a reunification of the academy and public life. When he says that "the public must continually be formed and reformed" and entrusts the task to "the leadership of the intellectuals" (Richard Rorty, for example), you know he is up to no good.

Fortunately, his project can come to nothing—and for the same reason that academics have been out of touch with public life for a century: because neither he nor they understands much about the lives of ordinary people. "One cannot but be struck by the breadth of the gap between the way academics write about these issues," Bender writes (referring to "sexism, racism, imperialism, etc."), "and the way ordinary citizens think and talk about these phenomena that are so much a part of their lives." There speaks a man who has probably never held five minutes' conversation with an "ordinary citizen" in his life and so is happily unlikely

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to get many more academics in touch with the rest of the world.

Shorter notices

Anna MacBride White &
A. Norman Jeffares, editors
The Gonne-Yeats Letters, 1893-1938.
Norton, 544 pages, $35

They were a difficult, mismatched pair, she an ardent Republican who spent the whole of her life urging the Dublin crowd to throw off the shackles of the British Empire, and he every inch a great Irish poet in the making, though the earlier *fin-de-siècle* languor was gradually to be replaced by a patrician *hauteur*. They had in common a certain mystical nationalism, a belief that the Irish people, properly spiritually cleansed and directed, could indeed enter into its birthright of greatness, a birthright long misplaced.

They had first met in 1889, and Yeats was to recall that meeting in a poem written during old age: "Maud Gonne at Howth Station waiting for a train,/ Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head." She was a strikingly tall woman, who always dressed in black; they cut quite a dash together at Dublin's Abbey Theatre.

Their common interests included a belief in spiritualism—Gonne often spoke of her being with him on an astral plane, though absent in body—and this included a conviction that Ireland possessed hidden forces, waiting to be marshalled.

Unfortunately, the means divided them. Maud Gonne saw herself as belonging among the people; Yeats abhorred the common herd. It was his great purpose to build a national literature, which would ultimately transcend national identity. Maud Gonne respected him for that and recognized his great talents: "You have a higher work to do," she wrote. "I was born to be in the midst of the crowd." Yeats did not return that respect. In his fifties he said that because of her opinionated mind, she had bartered the Horn of Plenty for "an old bellows full of angry wind."

Being a pilgrim soul, and regarding their relationship as essentially a platonic one—more that of brother and sister than of would-be man and wife—she refused repeatedly to marry him. Spiritual marriage must suffice. It was never sufficient for Yeats.

In 1903 she married John MacBride, a lifelong anti-British agitator who was shot in the Easter Rising of 1916. Though a romantic revolutionary in theory, he proved a bitter disappointment as a husband, being inclined to drunkenness and debauchery. Yeats, of course, had thrown up his hands in horror at the proposal. Was a woman of her grace and beauty really prepared to succumb to "the grossness of his [MacBride's] nature"? Yeats was proved correct: after MacBride had assaulted Maud Gonne's daughter *and* her governess, she divorced him, a long and bitter wrangle that sapped her energies for three long years.

Regrettably, the title of this book is something of a misnomer: it consists of hundreds of letters from Gonne to Yeats and fewer than thirty from Yeats to Gonne. The imbalance is easily explained. Maud Gonne's Dublin home was repeatedly ransacked by Free Staters, in the course of which the vast majority of her correspondence was either stolen or destroyed. The loss is a tragedy, and makes for a much poorer book than this one might have been. Yeats is a far greater letter writer than Gonne because he wrote with one eye on posterity, artfully, with a fine sense of the well-crafted phrase. Gonne's letters read as if they were tossed off in the very heat of conflict—which they were. This makes them thrilling and incisive on occasion—but too often clumsy or merely ephemeral.

And yet it is a necessary book to all who regard Yeats as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, for Gonne was his Muse from their earliest meetings until his final days, and anything that helps us to understand a little more precisely what feelings and what complicating external circumstances helped to bring into being some of

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the most enduring love poems of our time, must be a partial aid to explication, though one, necessarily, that must always be transcended in the sheer enjoyment of the poems themselves.

—*Michael Glover*

Sally B. Woodbridge
Bernard Maybeck: Visionary Architect.
Photography by Richard Barnes.
Abbeville, 247 pages, $55

Bernard Maybeck's is one of those names that float somewhere below the surface of American architectural greatness occupied by the likes of Henry Hobson Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Born the son of a master woodcarver in 1862 in New York City, Maybeck studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, and worked in New York and Kansas City before settling in San Francisco in 1890. There he designed a wide variety of picturesque eclectic buildings, some of the most distinguished of which were private houses (although the finest of which was the stylistically unclassifiable First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Berkeley), and established a reputation as a thoroughly eccentric romantic. Nevertheless, his work had sufficient quality in the eyes of his colleagues that he was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects in 1951, and was listed as ninth out this country's all-time top ten designers in an AIA poll of its members taken only last year.

As a visual introduction to Maybeck's work, *Bernard Maybeck: Visionary Architect* would be difficult to improve upon. Richard Barnes's photographs, most of them reproduced in full color, are nothing short of luscious, showing to advantage the inviting tones and textures of the wood and stone that were among Maybeck's favorite materials. The text, however, falls well short of the images. Sally B. Woodbridge labors dutifully to establish Maybeck as the "visionary architect" of the title, but the record doesn't really bear her out. She documents his debts to John Ruskin, Gottfried Semper, and Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, who apparently inspired in him an interest in structural expression, and credits him with resisting the local vogue for the turreted excesses of the Queen Anne style. Interesting, yes, but in a period that was dominated by Wright and such talented eclectic competitors as Ralph Adams Cram, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, and James Gamble Rogers, Maybeck at best was a local standout.

His career path in fact seemed to decline in originality as he progressed. To the unorthodox but authentically cozy chalet-style buildings he produced in the first years of the century Maybeck added a retrograde classicism in his Palace of Fine Arts for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The backsliding would have been less striking if Daniel Burnham, Richard Morris Hunt, and others had not all but exhausted the celebratory device in the 1893 "White City" at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. (Maybeck himself had competed for, and lost, the commission to design the California Building at the fair.)

Maybeck seems to have had no firm design philosophy, drawing with equal enthusiasm on English half-timbered examples and the masonry traditions of the Mediterranean. The author concedes as much when she writes that he "has been seen as both a proto-modernist and a romantic escapist who failed to move with the times." One might expect a defense of her subject as one or the other—or an explanation of his ambiguity—but among her strongest endorsements is that Maybeck was "never boring."

So we are left with a sequence of competent, warm-hearted descriptions in rather too great detail of buildings that are easy on the eyes but that advance few real architectural ideas. There is no sin in doing architecture that aspires no higher than to please, but Woodbridge clearly would like to make more of this architect. She would have done better to acknowledge him more forcefully for what he was, which wasn't at all bad.

—*Carter Wiseman*

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Letters

Orwell & Spain

To the Editors:
Mark Falcoff, in his interesting article on André Malraux (November 1992), says on page 33 that George Orwell served with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. This is not so. He served with a battalion of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM). The International Brigades, of course, were organized, dominated, and controlled by the Stalinist Comintern.

When asked to join the International Brigades, Orwell refused because, as he said, he might be asked to shoot fellow socialists. He was as usual right. The IB served as recruiting ground in Spain for the Russian NKVD, whose main objective was not the liquidation of fascists and Francoists but that of the POUM and other anti-Stalinist revolutionaries.

William Herrick
East Nassau, N.Y.

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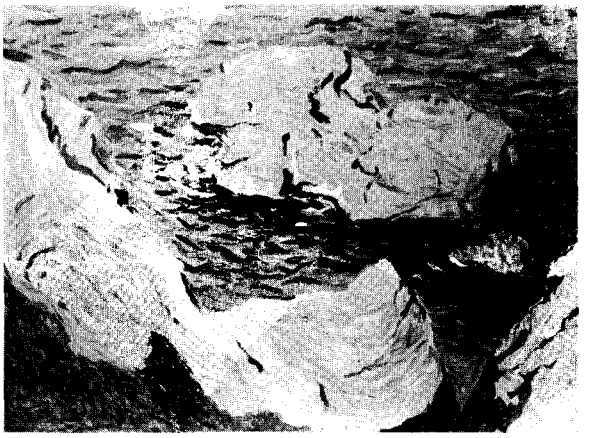

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